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バブルガムクライシス

サイレント・ファンファーレ

Bubblegum Crisis: Silent Fanfare

By Kurato Matsueda

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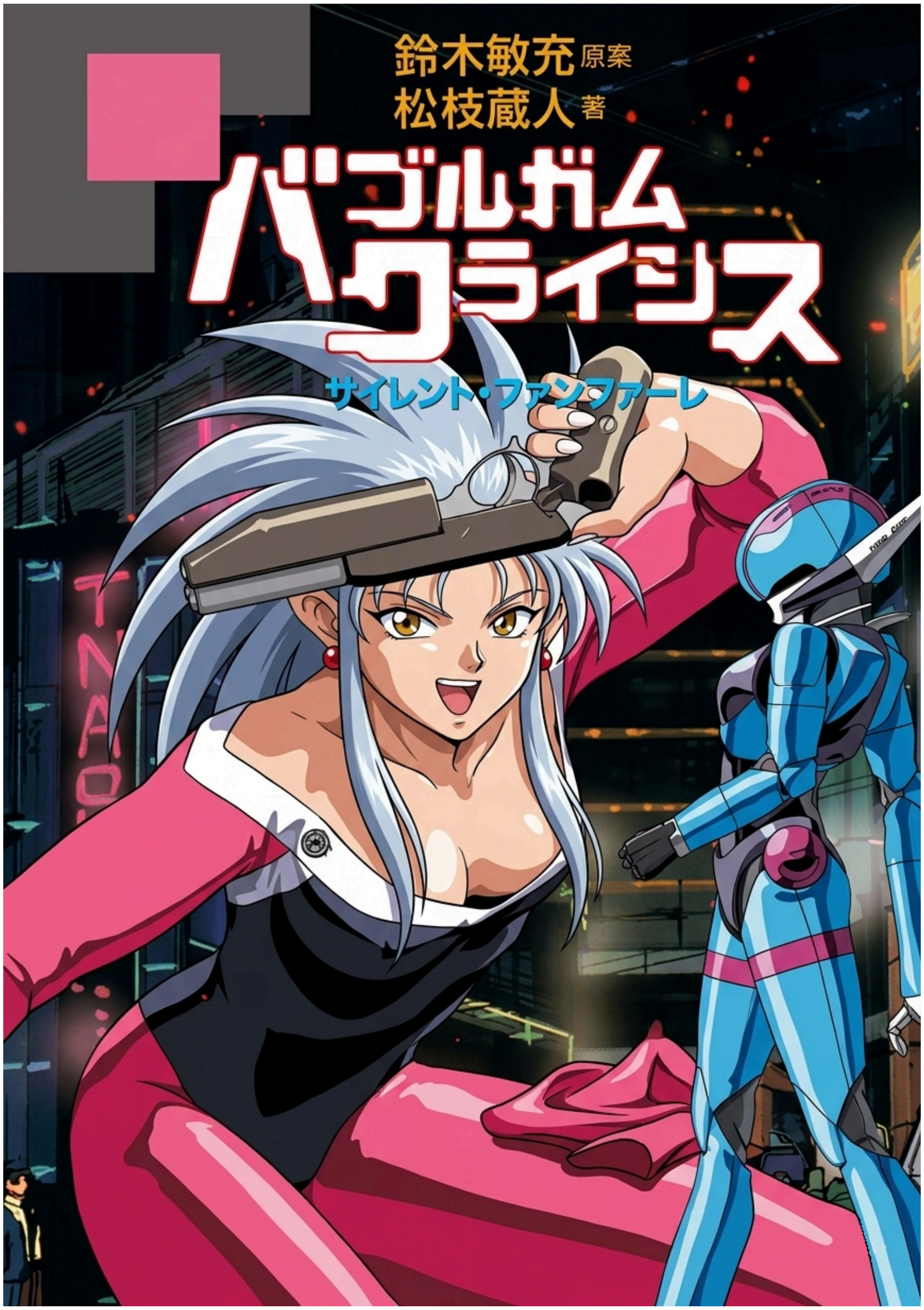
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Bubblegum Crisis: Silent Fanfare
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Prologue

Tokyo, A.D. 2032.

In an era where globalization and expansion have progressed without end, it is far more common to see "Tokyo" written in American characters as "TOKYO” than the kanji "東京"" The rapid changes that began at the end of the 20th century essentially turned the old "Tokyo" into a fossil, building an entirely different city—TOKYO—atop its strata.

In 2032, the word heard most frequently is "System." It is defined as an "accumulation of information as a functional mass." Wealth and culture are primary examples, but even time, power, and life itself are now considered systems.

Furthermore, a "system" refers to anything that can be digitized into unit information—represented by strings of 0s and 1s—allowing for simultaneous distribution and reconfiguration.

Once something is recognized as a system, it is immediately labeled "information" and enters a dizzying cycle of circulation. Countless massive, complex systems merge; information drawn from System A and System B forms a brand-new System D, resembling neither. Information flowing into the megalopolis undergoes every possible combination, bloating and suddenly transforming. The changes appearing on the surface are thorough, rapid, and take forms largely unforeseen.

This total metamorphosis originated from the rapid acceleration of a phenomenon once called "Informatization." The theory that "Everything is Information" was the ultimate conclusion reached by the 20th century. However, this phenomenon occurred almost simultaneously in cities worldwide: Boston, Berlin, Shanghai, Sydney, New York, Moscow, Tsukuba... it was a state of affairs that could be called a global revolution.

The change reached beyond industrial structures into political systems and culture itself. This manifested most typically in Tokyo.

At a speed and scale never before experienced by any city in history, Tokyo absorbed information. Global wealth, culture, and industry poured through undersea cables and satellite links like a waterfall. Following that flow, people of various ethnicities, classes, and cultures surged in one after another. Tokyo swallowed those waves like a black hole, growing infinitely massive.

Thus, Tokyo became TOKYO. Whether it is still appropriate to call TOKYO a "city" is unclear. It is a "Moebius Strip" of endless proliferation and expansion. People didn't truly realize how much was happening within the web of fiber-optic cables until it erupted before their eyes. What the world saw and marveled at was "TOKYO."

The massive influx of different races caused the collapse of a uniform "citizen" consciousness. The motives of those flowing in already transcended ethnicity or nation; a near-indiscriminate mixing and interbreeding of races occurred. While racial conflict didn't become a major issue, there was no "Frontier Spirit"—no unifying slogan like that of the United States.

The "TOKYOites" now entering their third generation drifted through the megalopolis as stateless people, even in their own consciousness.

Furthermore, TOKYO's endless expansion began to erode the nation of Japan itself, pushing "Japan" further to the periphery.

As if to deal a finishing blow, a massive earthquake seven years ago—rivaling the Great Kanto Earthquake—brought definitive change to TOKYO. It completely transformed the landscape, the city blocks, and the locations of residential and industrial zones.

While it remained the capital and Japanese citizens were free to enter, the motives, jobs, lives, and even the concepts of monetary value of the people living there differed from those of the "Japanese" outside.

If one could say "TOKYO is not Japan," then it is equally true that TOKYO is closely connected to every corner of the world—in a sense, TOKYO exists everywhere.

Some call this elusive mega-megalopolis "Tinsel City"—partly in irony, as a city of fake, cheap glitter, and partly with a slight hint of affection.

Tinsel City was, so to speak, a massive, extremely dangerous balloon floating unsteadily over the world, refusing to stop its expansion.

Symbolizing this Tinsel City, where countless contradictions coexist and intertwine to create new ones, are two great power systems competing for dominance: the United States Space Defense (USSD) and the mega-conglomerate, GENOM.

And born from the calculations and interests of these two global powers was the "Boomer."

Space engineering, into which the latest technology was poured without reserve for the coming space age, saw its results distorted and stolen. The Boomer emerged as a "sub-human" cyber-droid, completely indistinguishable from humans by outward appearance.

In a very short time, Boomers became one of Japan's most vital exports. Their types diversified, and their catalogs grew thicker by the day. GENOM, which held a monopoly on Boomer patents and manufacturing technology, received a steady stream of special orders for upgraded models.

Though originally designed for work in environments unsuited for humans—such as deep space or the ocean floor—it was not uncommon for requested functions to be far removed from the official purpose. GENOM fulfilled these orders with almost no complaints, and countless secret deals were made in the shadows.

It didn't take long for Boomers to be seen on the street corners of Tinsel City—the base of Boomer production. However, they appeared as the tools of high-tech crimes that far exceeded conventional common sense.

To deal with the succession of Boomer crimes, a heavy mobile unit called the AD Police (Advanced Police) was established within the police organization.

While trembling at that threat, the diverse residents continued their daily lives as if no change had occurred.

Or perhaps, to those accustomed to rapid change, the Boomers—unprecedented destroyers and slaughterers—seemed like the perfect monsters for a modern Apocalypse, signaling the arrival of the final crisis.

Here, a scientific armed group rose to oppose Boomer crime. Self-styled "Knight Sabers"—a group of "dark enforcers" who accept requests to resolve incidents for a reward. This story depicts the activities of the Knight Sabers through a representative Boomer crime that occurred in the ultra-modern city, Tinsel City.

Chapter 1

A brilliant crimson sports car sped through the late afternoon sunlight. Despite Tinsel City's "Super Expressway" being world-renowned for its 24-hour traffic jams, the flow was currently quite smooth.

Occasionally, gaps like vacuum zones appeared on the laminate-asphalt surface, reflecting a dull light. Taking advantage of these gaps, the crimson car continued to accelerate.

The woman behind the wheel had the convertible top down, letting the wind toss her soft hair as she displayed masterful handling. She wore trendy dark sunglasses.

"Whoa!" a bearded driver in the high cab of a 20-meter trailer blurted out. He had noticed a flashy car about twenty or thirty vehicles back in his rearview mirror just moments ago. Now, it was practically "tickling" the side of his trailer. The massive truck swerved aside in surprise.

The woman in the sports car removed her sunglasses and grinned at the truck driver. Her innocent expression suggested she was about twenty years old. From the high trailer, the interior of the open car was fully visible. Against the strong headwind, her outfit clung to her body, revealing a surprisingly stunning, if slightly slender, proportion.

The driver, his thick neck covered in stubble, swallowed hard, but by then the crimson car had already slipped past the trailer and was overtaking the next vehicle.

After driving for a while, the sports car decelerated and exited the expressway. It cruised slowly through a stylish district lined with artificial trees, as if the driver were enjoying the view.

Apparently, she hadn't been in a particular hurry. Her aggressive driving on the expressway seemed to be for the simple reason that "dawdling on the super expressway is a drag."

The sunlight filtering through the lush leaves of the artificial trees—which never shed—shone on her pale, unmasked face.

Linna Yamazaki.

She is a member of the Knight Sabers, a professional team of Boomer hunters whose rumors had recently begun to circulate among the general public. Of course, no one besides the members knows her true identity. As her exceptional proportions and healthy beauty (which made the truck driver stare) suggested, Linna's public profession is an aerobics instructor.

Soon, a busy main street came into view. Linna parked her car in a driveway just before the corner and looked up at the building across the street. It was a rare, sophisticated design, framed in metallic-glittering beams with large glass windows like a showroom reaching the upper floors.

The ground floor was occupied by "SILKY DOLL," a shop with its name painted on the window. Linna's eyes scanned the interior, which was clearly visible and filled with fashion-related tenants: a hair salon, a boutique, and a jewelry store. Seeing that the person she was looking for wasn't in the shop, Linna entered the building through a side service entrance.

"What... what is all this noise!?"

The moment the elevator doors opened to the penthouse on the top floor, Linna cried out in surprise at the state of the room. Normally, the room contained only one small, state-of-the-art computer; otherwise, it was clearly a single woman's private room. It was usually kept tidy, exuding an elegant "mature woman" vibe that Linna felt she could never compete with.

"Ah, Linna. Watch the cords when you come in. I just finished the wiring!"

A young boy, with several scraps of electrical tape stuck to his cheek, peeked out from behind a cluttered pile of computer displays. There were at least ten computers crammed into the room.

What on earth has started? Linna wondered, her eyes darting around.

"...I see. So it went well. Yes, we're ready on this end too. Linna just arrived. Stay on standby for a bit, Priss. Good job, stay safe—"

The woman who finished the call on the video phone turned around. She looked to be two or three years older than Linna, in her early twenties. Her short hairstyle and cool eyes gave an impression of composure and intelligence beyond her years.

"Linna, I don't have time for a detailed explanation. For now, just have a seat over there and watch."

Her tone wasn't overbearing, but it carried an undeniable weight. This was Sylia Stingray, the founder and leader of the Knight Sabers—the brain of the group. She was the mistress of this penthouse headquarters and the owner of the fashion building and the lingerie shop on the first floor.

Though Sylia told her to sit, Linna felt she might trip over the fiber-optic cables and wires sprawling across the floor if she moved even an inch.

"Linna! Don't just wander around, you're in the way!"

A shrill voice came from another corner of the room.

"Nene...!"

The owner of the voice was Nene Romanova. She belonged to the AD Police, the riot suppression unit newly established within the police force to handle Boomer crime. Of course, that was her cover; her true identity was a member of the Knight Sabers.

"That's mean! 'You came too?' I got a call from Sylia and rushed over here on the Super Express. I had to carry computers, do the wiring... I've been running ragged! And did you hear that call? Priss is already out there and finished a job, but we couldn't get a hold of you at all. Where were you wandering off to!?"

"Well… it was such nice weather, I just went for a drive to the Shonan area. The sea is great after all. But shouldn't you be worried about your salary being docked for skipping out on your AD Police job?"

"I'm off duty today!" Nene pouted. her round face puffed up, making her already girl-like expression look even more childish.

"Anyway, for this job, everything is automatic. Someone who can't even use a computer shouldn't say a word and just keep their mouth shut!"

"Nene, stop the chatter. Okay, switching everything on. One—two—"

"On!" Sylia's sharp voice rang through the room.

Simultaneously, the room lights dimmed to less than half. Conversely, the brightness of the computer displays surged, and the faces of the four people—staring intently at the screens—loomed in the darkness. Except for Linna, who was peering over their shoulders in confusion, everyone's expression was tense.

"I… I think I'm almost in… I got access…"

The one whispering was the boy with the tape on his cheek. He was sitting in front of the largest monitor among the stacked displays, his fingers flying across the keyboard with invisible speed.

This was Mackie, Sylia's younger brother. The youngest of the group, his machine-operating skills were top-tier; he called himself the group's mechanic. Looking at the cables extending from his machine to the others, it was clear his was the main computer controlling the entire system.

"Access complete! Sis, Nene, start sorting the incoming data!"

Mackie shouted and jumped to another terminal. Data began scrolling across the screen he had been watching at a furious speed. For a while, the only sounds were the clack-clack-clack of keyboards and the occasional mechanical hum from the computers.

"Yes! I caught one!" Nene suddenly screamed.

When Linna looked, Nene’s screen—which had been filled with lines of code—now showed a vivid, colorful pattern.

"But what is this? It's just blurry, I don't get it at all."

Sylia glanced at the display.

"It's thermal. Information from the heat sensors all over the body. Nene, save that to file as is, and start on the next one!"

"Okay!"

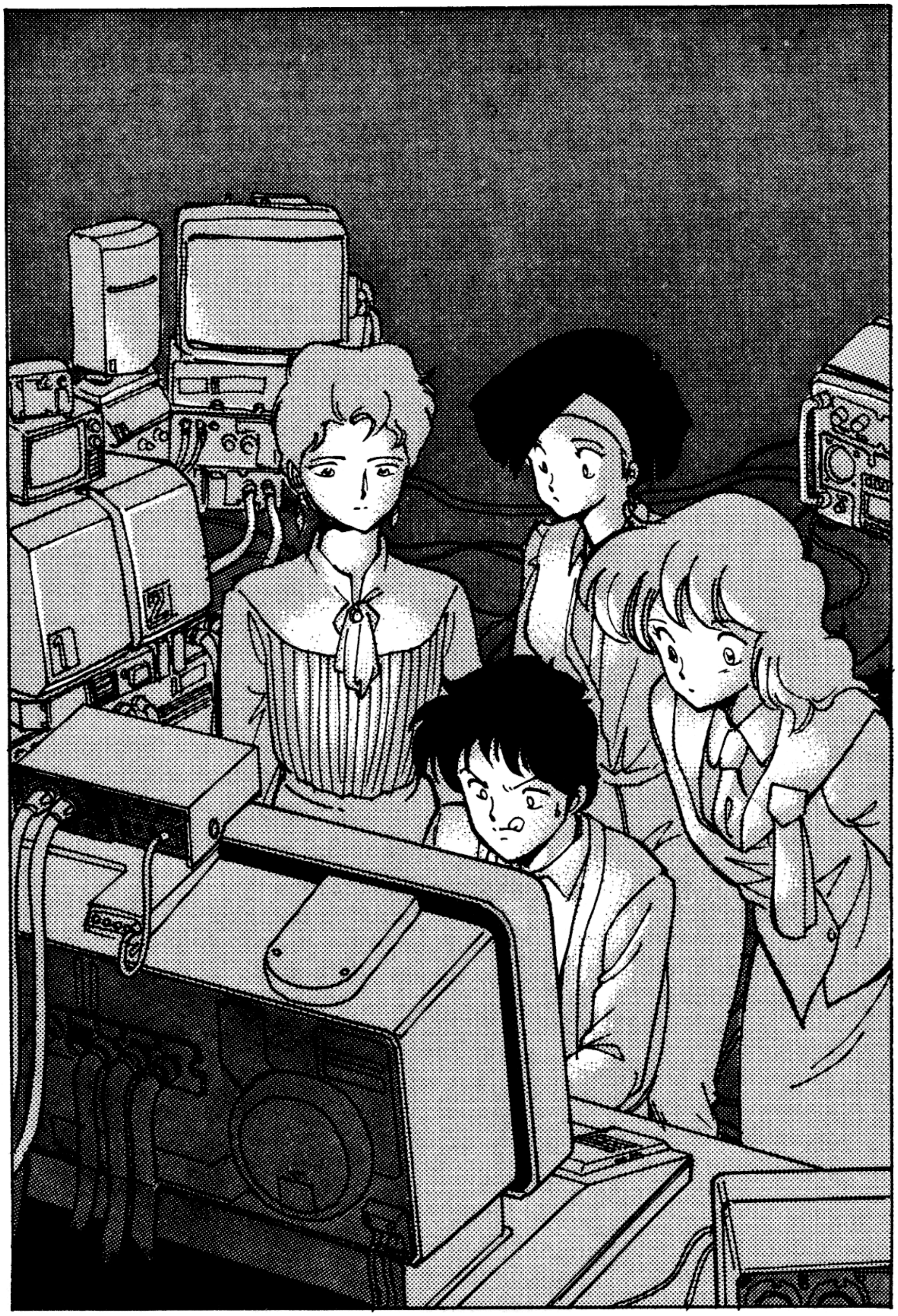
As soon as Sylia’s order flew, Nene lunged at the neighboring keyboard.

"Tactile, captured. Olfactory, OK!"

Sylia spoke with a hint of excitement as she moved to another device.

"Balance... wait, that's weird. It feels like it's shaking a lot."

"Don't worry about every little thing, Nene. You find the visual feed next. Mackie, haven't you found the audio yet? Try to see if you can link to the thought system."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Sylia called out to Mackie over the mountain of computers. Mackie was facing a computer right next to Linna, wearing headphones. He had a creepy, grinning smile on his face.

"Mackie, Sylia is calling you—"

As Linna spoke, she snatched the headphones. A faint sound leaked from them...

"Ah... ahh... mmm... ahh..."

Linna immediately slapped Mackie's cheek.

"Linna? What happened with Mackie?" Sylia looked up.

"He's a pervert! I wondered what he was listening to so intently, and it's...!"

Just then, a piercing scream came from the other side. It was Nene.

Linna, Mackie, and Sylia all abandoned the keyboards and ran to her.

Nene held her hands over her mouth, trying to pull away from the display in horror, yet her eyes remained wide, glued to the screen.

"Whoa! This is amazing!" Mackie blurted out as he peered at the monitor.

"What? What is it?"

Linna leaned in and pulled the headphone cord, accidentally unplugging the jack.

The wall-mounted speakers suddenly roared to life.

Moan... ah... ahh...

The woman making those groans was shown in a large close-up on the screen. As she leaned back, sweat could be seen beads on her throat. The screen was reddish overall, likely because it was captured by an infrared camera. The only things that weren't red were the green computer scope framing the image and the coordinate axes.

A thin line separated from the frame, moving toward the center of the coordinates and becoming a circle. It moved irregularly, as if groping the woman's bare skin, eventually stopping at the bottom right of the screen, shrinking into a white dot that blinked a few times. Then, the entire screen moved toward that point.

What appeared in the center was the woman's bare breast. The camera moved closer to focus. As soon as the camera stopped, a rugged hand—apparently a man's—appeared as if waiting for that moment.

When it grabbed the breast, a woman's voice, like a long sigh through her nose, came seductively from the speakers.

"It's porn! Was today's job just watching this!?" Linna shouted.

Sylia quickly operated the keyboard on Nene's lap. The green scope, coordinates, and white cursor remained, but the woman's skin and the man's hand vanished, replaced by an expressionless line graph. Ignoring Mackie's disappointed look, Nene ran and switched off the speaker connection.

"Sylia, where did Priss report the target was?" Nene asked, looking indignant.

"She said he went into a hotel... with a woman."

"Sylia, you're so dense for your age! When a man and woman go into a hotel, there's only one thing they do! I don't have any interest in being a voyeur, I don't care how much money you offer!"

"But Nene, the purpose of this job is to investigate all of the target's behavioral patterns..."

"That's right, exactly as Sis says! I had no idea those guys did stuff like this with real women. This is a chance to study their vicious methods!"

Mackie tried to enter the command to return to the previous screen, but Linna grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

"You're not interested in 'study,' are you? Sylia, explain today's job so I can understand too. What exactly is the 'target'?"

"I see. That screen just now... that was actually a Boomer."

"You mean... that woman doing those... gross things like a human was a Boomer?"

"No. Not her. Her partner. In other words, those images were the actual acts as observed through the Boomer's eyes. This job is to probe a Boomer's behavioral patterns from the inside... simply put, we've broken into a Boomer's internal system!"

Priss leaned against her beloved motorcycle, glaring irritably at the building in front of her. It was a suspicious-looking "cheap hotel," its weather-beaten synthetic mortar walls discolored to the shade of a sewer rat. Forty minutes had already passed since the "Target" Boomer had vanished inside with a young woman.

The sun, which had been casting long arms of light into the narrow alley where Priss stood, had sunk toward the west, leaving only a poisonous, bruised red stain clinging to the edge of the sky.

The orders from Sylia were simple: find someone who looked like a Boomer. This wasn't a particularly difficult request. While the AD Police had professionals who used equipment to distinguish Boomers from humans, Priss possessed a sharp intuition and a unique "scent detection" skill that rivaled any of them.

However, the second part of the order was the hard part. She had to plant a machine—a tiny transmitter-like device—on the discovered Boomer without being noticed. Naturally, this limited her choice of locations. It was almost impossible to make contact with a sensitive Boomer in a deserted area without being detected.

Looking for a place where Boomers might lurk, yet where bumping into a stranger wouldn't seem unnatural, Priss chose a 24-hour discotheque. She often went to discos to blow off steam, and she sometimes performed there fronting her band, *The Replicants*. She knew the layout well.

Finding a Boomer, however, was no easy task. The first disco was a bust. At the second, the moment she pressed the device against the neck of a man she'd pegged as a Boomer, he let out a scream that drowned out the loud music. According to Sylia, the back of the neck should have been a blind spot for a Boomer's sensory organs. But as the man clutched his neck in pain, his hands were stained with blood. He was human. Priss had barely escaped before a fight broke out.

She finally found a Boomer at the fourth location, but had no chance to get close. It wasn't until the seventh—a relatively high-class disco she rarely visited—that she successfully planted the device on a Boomer she'd followed to this cheap hotel.

The reason Priss judged him to be a Boomer was his dance style: it was too precise, too perfect. That, and his seemingly inexhaustible toughness. He stood in stark contrast to his female companion, who looked utterly exhausted.

Priss's suspicions began to grow after the Boomer left the disco with the woman. The mission to plant the device was a success, but that wasn't what worried her. The woman was so tired she could barely walk, likely having had quite a bit to drink.

The Boomer had gently wrapped his arm around the woman's waist, almost carrying her, until they reached this rundown district. The gap between the high-end disco and this seedy hotel bothered Priss. One might think it was just a secret tryst, but the woman's clothes—though not flashy—were tasteful and high-quality. She didn't look like a bored socialite having an affair or a wild girl out for an adventure. It seemed more likely the man had forced her into the hotel.

"—Even so, I've never heard of a Boomer getting horny and seducing a woman," Priss muttered to herself.

"Hey there, lady. That's a strange outfit for a streetwalker."

A young, muscular man approached Priss. He wore a disheveled shirt with a coffee stain, and his hair was dyed a garish color. Looking down the street, Priss saw women who were clearly prostitutes loitering here and there. The streetlights were broken, but the kitschy neon signs and hologram advertisements illuminated the couples entering the cheap hotel.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not one of them."

"Oh? Then you're waiting for your boyfriend? Skipping the disco and the bar and heading straight for the bed, huh? I like that attitude. How about I help you warm up until he gets here?"

The man leaned in, his breath reeking of alcohol. He tried to force a kiss, pressing his massive frame—three times Priss's size—against her. Priss reflexively turned her face away.

At that moment, a faint emergency signal beeped from the transmitter in her helmet.

* * *

"Thirty million yen!?"

Linna, holding a mug of coffee, jumped off the sofa with a startled cry. She had managed to secure a spot on the floor by clearing away the piles of fiber-optic cables and wires—a messy "wiring graveyard" to someone like her, who was technologically illiterate. Coffee splashed everywhere.

"Eek! Hot!"

Nene, who was sitting on the carpet by Linna's feet, let out a yelp and pushed her headset away from her ear.

"Honestly, Linna, you only get excited when money is involved. You haven't forgotten the job, have you? Though, since you can't even use a computer, it doesn't look like you'll have much to do this time."

"You've got to be joking!" Linna snapped back. "If we're getting thirty million, I'm all in. I was just late and let Priss beat me to it, but next time is my turn. I'll take down a C-Series combat Boomer with my bare hands!"

"Right, I'm counting on you, Linna," Sylia said with a smile, trying to soothe her. "The Boomer we're accessing now isn't a combat model. It seems to be an information-gathering type—a spy Boomer. They've been using them as secretaries at GENOM, but since they don't usually stand out, this is the first one we've caught. Given the nature of their work, we couldn't identify them without something like this 'Bee Chip.' This is an unexpectedly big haul."

Sylia looked at the dozen computers running at full capacity. Massive amounts of data gathered from the Boomer's sensors in the cheap hotel were flowing into the main computer, being sorted and recorded onto data disks.

"So, we don't need data on combat Boomers?" Linna asked, sounding a bit deflated as she leaned back onto the sofa.

"Of course we do. The client for this job is none other than the AD Police. They're desperate to stop Boomer rampages; the number of officers sacrificed grows every day. The AD Police Strategy Research Institute developed this 'Bee Chip' primarily to counter combat Boomers. If we analyze this data, we can find their weaknesses and blind spots, build effective weapons, and research squad formations for actual combat."

Sylia picked up one of the "Bee Chips" she had been rolling in her hand. It was a dark, flat oval, barely 10mm in diameter. It had a sharp needle for attachment and three pairs of hair-thin terminals—six in total—on its sides to infiltrate Boomer sensory circuits. It looked exactly like a bee.

Linna took the chip and held it up to her nose. "Amazing... this tiny thing collects more info than twelve computers can handle. I guess the AD Police researchers weren't just making clunky rocket launchers and rifles after all..."

Linna fiddled with it like it was a small insect, then looked up at Sylia curiously.

"But isn't it weird? When it comes to Boomer hunting, the Knight Sabers are the AD Police's biggest rivals. Why would they trust us with such a trump card?"

Nene, who had been listening through her headset, turned around and explained with a smirk.

"The AD Police is just a department of the police force. But it's an open secret that the organization was built with massive donations from GENOM—the very ones who make the Boomers. GENOM doesn't want to stop the Boomer business, but they're worried that 'bad' Boomers will ruin their reputation. So, they use others to clean up the mess. They’re letting the leak continue and making someone else wipe up the floor. Isn't it disgusting?"

"What does that have to do with this?" Linna asked.

"Well, it's... um..." Nene got tangled in her own explanation, so Sylia took over.

"It's like this, Linna. What GENOM wants from the AD Police is to stop Boomers once they've already started a crime and minimize the damage. They don't want them to *prevent* Boomer crime itself."

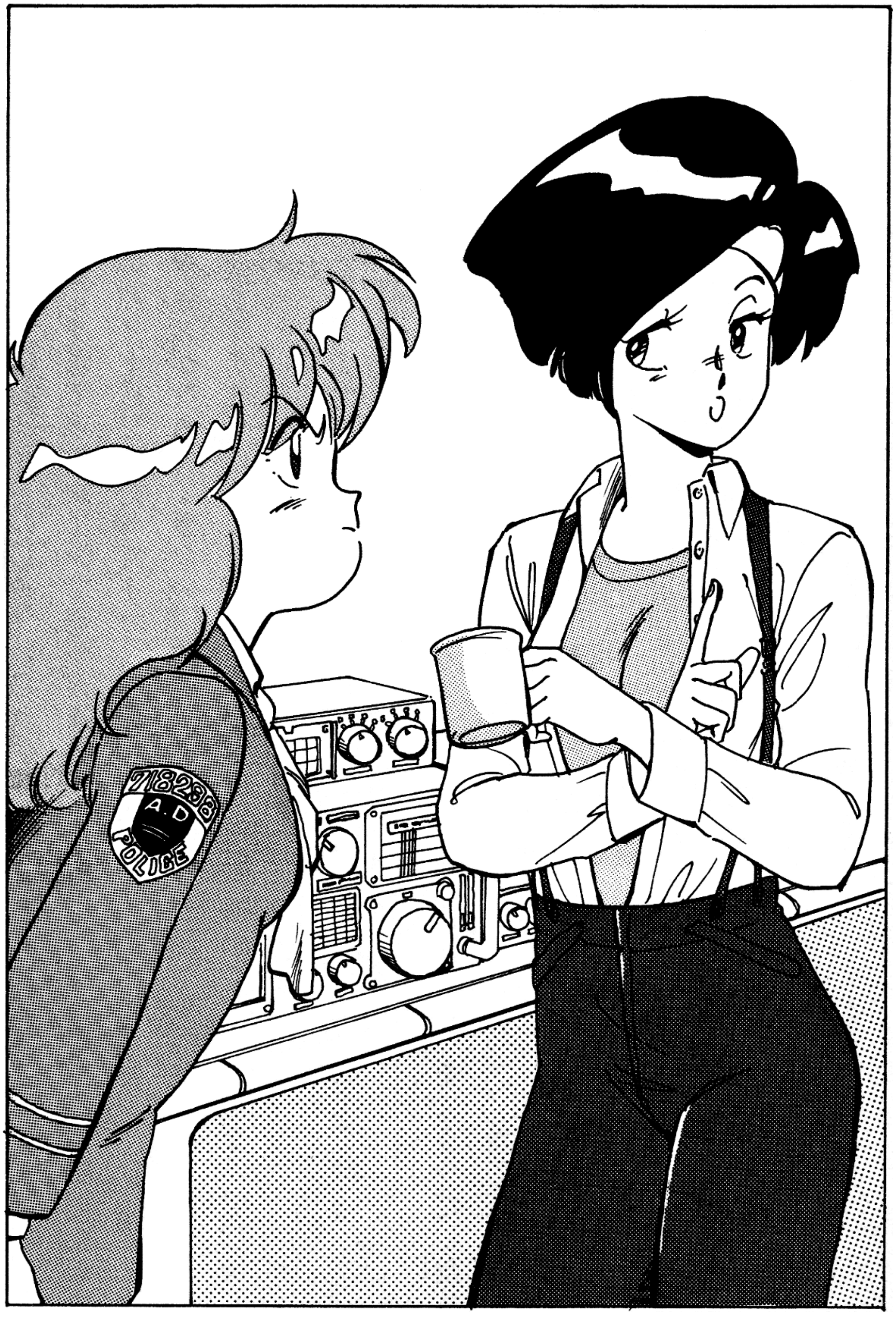
"Preventing it would mean..."

"Yes," Sylia continued. "It would mean making it so Boomers *can't* operate. Regardless of GENOM’s intentions, the AD Police’s goal is to hunt Boomers. To do that, they need reliable ways to identify them and powerful weapons to render them useless. First, they need data on Boomer performance."

"I see. If a perfect counter-Boomer measure was created, GENOM's product value would plummet. So they pressure the AD Police to just chase the 'bad apples' and not develop fundamental countermeasures. So, what about this Bee Chip?"

"They likely developed it in total secrecy from GENOM. But once it reaches the testing and implementation stage, you can't keep the secret within a few technicians. If an AD Police officer was caught trying to plant this on a Boomer, the existence of the AD Police itself would be at risk."

"Aha! So that’s why the job fell to us. We’re the mice tasked with putting the bell on the cat. No wonder the AD Police—who usually only pay Nene a pittance—were willing to cough up thirty million yen."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"Hey! What do you mean 'pittance'!? I live a respectable life! Unlike you, Linna, who lives so flashily you're drowning in car loans. I heard from Priss you started another part-time job!"

"Hmph! It's a cool job that requires talent and sense! Someone like you, who pinches pennies from Knight Sabers' checks just to pay rent, wouldn't understand!"

"Why you...!"

"Stop it, both of you—"

"Look! The screen!"

Everyone's eyes snapped to the monitor Mackie was pointing at.

It was the interior of the cheap hotel. A nightstand was overturned, shards of a broken water pitcher were scattered, and the floor was soaked. In the center of the screen, the woman from earlier was collapsed against the sofa, blood dripping from her knee.

As Linna went to speak, the naked woman on screen turned toward the camera, brushing her messy hair out of her face. She was holding a gun with both hands.

Suddenly, the image began to shake violently. The woman's face, contorted with terror, rapidly grew larger. The Boomer was charging at her.

The moment Sylia switched on the speakers, the woman pulled the trigger. A thunderous explosion roared through the speakers, and the room on screen blew up. The door, which had been buckled inward, was blown out into the hallway like a piece of paper.

A thunderous sound, like a rocket blast, echoed even in the penthouse, which was a considerable distance from the cheap hotel.

Priss received the signal and sprinted toward the cheap hotel. The man who had been bothering her chased after her into the cramped lobby, not knowing what was happening. Priss drew a small raygun hidden in her boot, and the man finally snapped out of it.

The people in the lobby stared at her as if she were a freak.

"Wait, lady! What's the rush?"

The man with the dyed hair appeared at the stairs. Naturally, the door to the room where the gunshot originated was locked.

"Can you break this door down?" Priss asked a naked man standing nearby.

"Sure! For a lady like you, I'd go through fire and water!"

He entered an open room across the hall to get a running start. He was likely one of the naked couples who had jumped out in surprise. He took a breath and charged.

CRACK!

The door split down the middle, and the man’s massive body tumbled into the room.

"Ugh, a Boomer!"

Nene, who had stood up from the carpet with her fists raised, and Linna, who had dropped her mug, stared at each other in shock. Sylia tried to get between them.

The image on the screen returned to normal.

"This brat! I thought he was being suspiciously quiet!" Nene turned her anger toward Mackie.

"N-no! Look at the screen!"

In the room, the Boomer had taken a direct hit from the woman standing beside him. Priss dove to the floor. A secondary explosion sent a pillar of fire through the doorway. A charred mass was blown out of the room and landed right in front of Priss.

It was a woman’s arm, still wearing a wristwatch. The clasp of the watch glinted in the light. Priss burned the mark engraved on it into her memory, then spun around and scrambled down the stairs.

She had no time to save the men pinned against the walls, the fainting women, or the others fleeing in madness. Escaping the hotel with her life, she reached her bike and looked back. The fifth floor and above were already engulfed in bright red flames.

Gasping for breath, Priss pulled the microphone from her helmet and whispered into it.

"The woman the Boomer killed... she was a GENOM employee!"

Chapter 2

The monitor images all moved upward. This indicated that the satellite's camera was tracking accurately from north to south.

Small seven-inch monitors were embedded along a gently curved metal wall. Instrument lamps and LEDs flickered, revealing the cramped space. Bundles of colorful cables and fiber-optic cables were tangled together. Occasionally, a focus would adjust with a faint whirring sound. There was no one there to hear it... there wasn't even room for a person.

The reason the monitors existed at all was simply for the initial system checks before it became operational. If one were looking for a living thing, they would have to look 200,000 meters below.

This was the interior of a satellite—the heart of the Military Beam Orbital Satellite, the pride of the USSD (United States Space Defense).

Depending on the magnification, a wide-angle lens could fit the entire Earth into one frame. Conversely, if a real-time feed of a high-resolution scan (capable of detecting centimeters) were shown, the human eye couldn't keep up. In those cases, specific points were selected and sent as still images.

As of 2032, the USSD is said to own about 200 of these satellites. Thanks to advances in space engineering, these unmanned satellites feature vastly improved self-repair and orbital correction systems; most are likely functioning perfectly.

In the late 20th century, nuclear weapons were compared to the "Sword of Damocles"—a sharp blade hung over a king's throne by a single hair to remind him of the peril of power. Superpowers kept the peace by hanging these "swords" over each other's heads.

Whether that metaphor is fitting doesn't matter. The problem is that now, a new sword—the Beam Orbital Satellite—has been added to the nuclear arsenal. While these satellites can track and shoot down a nuclear missile within two minutes, their powerful lasers can also strike a ground target with an accuracy of a few centimeters. In some ways, they are more terrifying than nukes. With nuclear weapons, you can survive if you aren't at a direct hit site. But a satellite can identify and track a specific individual. Unless you live deep underground for the rest of your life, there is no escape.

The sword that once threatened one king now glitters over the head of every single person on Earth.

One of these satellites was currently moving its camera south along the 140th meridian. After crossing from the Arctic Ocean to land, the whirring of the focus became frequent over the rugged mountains of Eastern Siberia. Occasionally, a still image was taken to confirm an identity, such as when a small animal ran across the frame.

Entering the Sea of Japan, the next landmass was Japan. It skimmed the western edges of Hokkaido and Tohoku, moved into Honshu, and proceeded across the mountains toward the Kanto Plain.

The system suddenly became active as it reached the Tsukuba area—once the world-famous high-tech "Technopolis." Though the city blocks were orderly, it felt as crowded as Tokyo had fifty years prior. As Tokyo became “TOKYO” and detached itself from Japan, administrative levels of the judiciary and executive branches had moved to Tsukuba, pushed out by more visceral and massive power and economic systems. But Tsukuba lacked the frantic energy that once drove Tokyo.

Once the satellite finished its routine checks of government offices and research institutes, it passed over Tsukuba without hesitation.

Just a short distance south of Tsukuba, the landscape changed entirely. This was the massive city expanding its outer edges: TOKYO—better known as "Tinsel City."

Japan was about to experience the most moving time of day: sunset.

On the satellite's feed, the range from 130 to 150 degrees east is the clearest. From there, one can view all of Japan, from Etrof Island in the east to Nagasaki in the west. The darkness advancing from the east swallowed Hokkaido, eroded the coastline of Tohoku, and slowly moved its vertical line westward.

In a more magnified view, the struggle between day and night was even clearer. First, the mountains changed. Shadows pooled on their eastern slopes like water soaking into fabric, deepening and expanding. The shadows swallowed the foothills and stretched across the plains at a steady speed, meeting the massive darkness coming from the west until even the twilight was embraced. Night was complete.

The Kanto Mass Area, centered on Tinsel City, seemed to resist the night because there were no major mountain ranges to the west. But that wasn't the only reason. The massive energy emitted by the megalopolis lingered in the sky, scattering sunlight and making it hard for pure darkness to settle.

As if defying the approaching dark, city lights flickered on one by one. The sheer volume of light from the city was said to be visible to the naked eye from the moon.

To the satellite, however, such a moving view was irrelevant. This was the moment the entire system worked its hardest. The number of checkpoints was ten times that of Tsukuba. Between the scattered sunlight and the city's glow, scanning was more difficult than through thick clouds.

From the ground, the sunset looked like a rotting mandarin orange, but from high above, Tinsel City glowed beautifully in the rays. What stood out most was the massive, jagged rift snaking north to south.

It was the "Great Fault"—the sharp claw mark left by the Second Great Kanto Earthquake that had plunged the Kanto Mass Area into the depths of terror seven years ago.

The majestic sight of the massive GENOM Building, the stronghold of the super-conglomerate known as the GENOM Corporation. It towered over the current District 6—the area formerly known as "Old Shinjuku."

On the other side of the power struggle stood the USSD, the primary authority system opposing GENOM. Naturally, the scanning from their beam orbital satellites focused primarily on the GENOM Building and other related facilities.

At sunset, information was immediately broadcast onto the public disclosure channels. It became data that urged the dispatch of city firefighting organizations even faster than reports from the chaotic fire scenes. Immediately after the contact from Priss, this was the same information Sylia and the others referred to for confirmation in their penthouse on the top floor of a fashion building.

"Does this mean the Boomer self-destructed?" Nene asked, peering at the still image projected on the monitor over Mackie's shoulder as he accessed the public channel on the computer console.

In the narrow alleyway on the screen, half-naked men and women, along with gaudily dressed women clearly recognizable as being in "that line of business," were crowded together in a state of panic. Something looking like Priss's bike was visible, but her figure was lost in the crowd and couldn't be identified.

"Thank goodness. With this much chaos, I'm sure Priss didn't get caught by the AD Police, right?" Linna interrupted from the side, pushing Nene's question aside as she rushed Mackie. Mackie used the keypad to specify the location and enlarged sections of the alleyway one after another, but no silhouette clearly identifiable as Priss could be found.

"It's okay, Linna. Priss masked everything from the license plate to the VIN in advance and intentionally blended into the crowd. She's sharp, after all. But why are you so worried about her, Linna?"

"W-well, she's an important comrade. It's only natural to worry!" Linna hurriedly tried to cover her tracks.

"Oh, is that so? There's no way Linna, who only has money and herself on her mind, would care about someone else. I know the truth—you're using Priss as an excuse to plot another way to make money. Why didn't you invite me!?"

At that moment, the beam orbital satellite No. 126, flying directly over Tinsel City, had committed a significant oversight. This was partly due to the scan hitting during sunset, the most difficult time frame for detection. That was another factor in this incident. By the time No. 126 completed its prescribed checks, the satellite's main body was already far south of Tinsel City, over the Ogasawara Islands. It was impossible to continue scanning Tinsel City further. The next orbital satellite was moving south over Siberia; No. 126 yielded its territory and slowly departed toward New Guinea and Australia.

The final report regarding Tinsel City delivered from No. 126 to the USSD was a fire in the dedicated residential area of the Old Shibuya area, District 11.

* * *

"Nene, that 'cutesy' act of yours went out of style decades ago when everyone in Japan was living in easy, peaceful times. It won't get you anywhere in the chaotic Tinsel City, filled with danger and decadence," Linna remarked.

"Hmph!" Annoyed, Nene left Linna's side and went over to Sylia, who was facing a computer. "I wondered what you were doing, but Sylia, you have bad taste too. Replaying that Boomer porn scene? You aren't starved for men, are you?"

At Nene's words, the corners of Sylia's mouth, which had been fixed in a grim expression as she stared at the monitor, softened just a fraction.

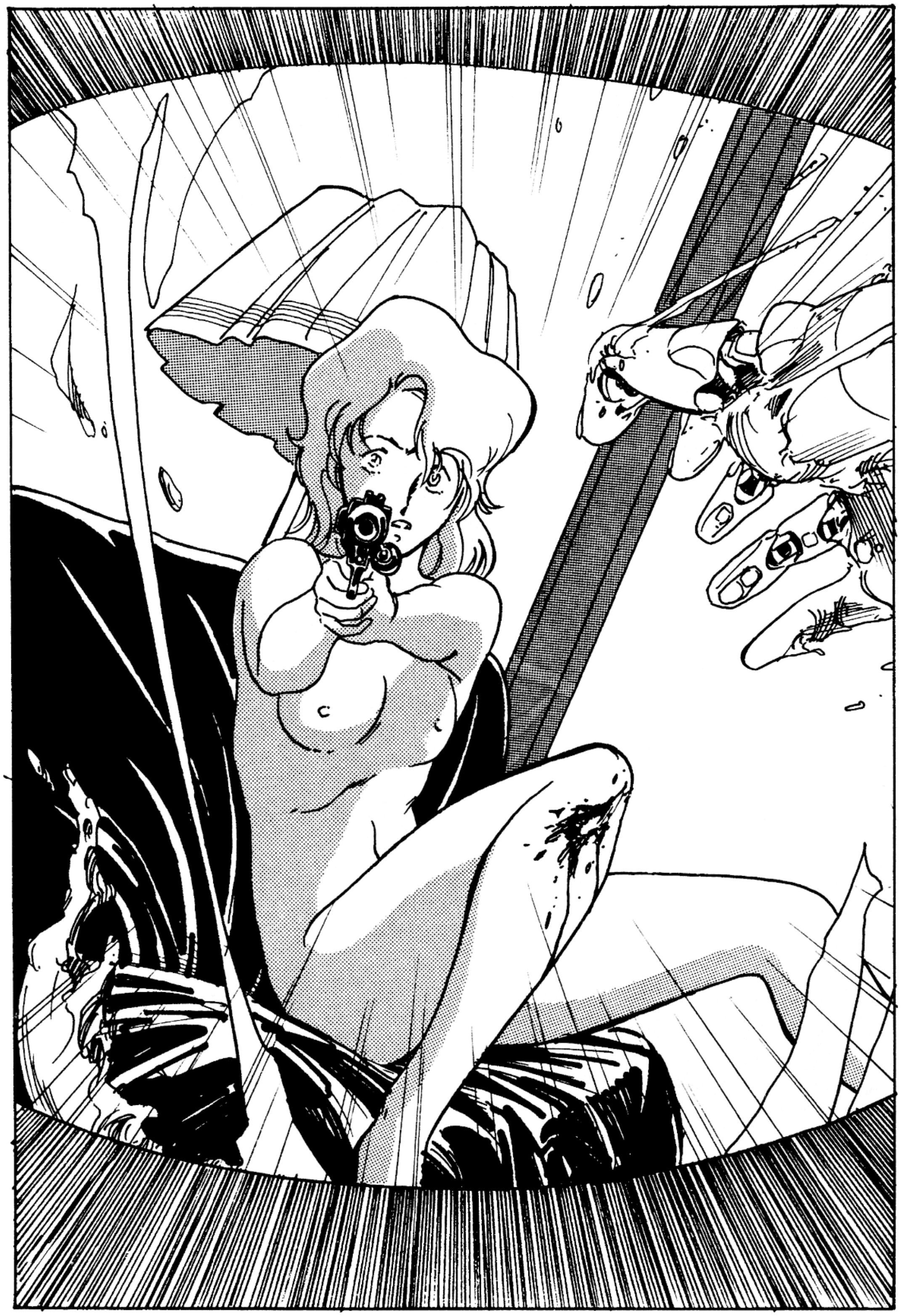
"Even if I were, the thought of this image being a Boomer's cold gaze would blow any romance away. That's not it—I was curious about your earlier question, so I was looking into it. Apparently, the Boomer's explosion wasn't a self-destruction. Look closely at this..."

As she spoke, Sylia operated the keyboard and played the video in slow motion from a certain point. It was the moment the woman on the screen looked up from the sofa and aimed a gun at the Boomer.

The Boomer, realizing its identity was discovered, shed its artificial skin in an instant. Bits of scattered artificial skin and a black, eerily shining steel hand appeared at the edge of the screen for a moment. Unlike a cheap movie, the tension was palpable. The gun was aimed perfectly at the Boomer's forehead. Despite her heavy breathing and her chest heaving, the muzzle barely wavered. Looking into the woman's bloodshot eyes, a shiver of fear ran down Nene's spine.

"M-maybe you're saying the bullet this woman fired took down the Boomer in one shot?"

"It seems that 'maybe' is the case," Sylia whispered.



Linna and Mackie had also come up behind Nene, drawn to the screen.

"Priss reported that the woman had a GENOM employee badge on her watch, right? If so, does that mean a professional Boomer hunter has appeared inside GENOM!?" Linna asked Sylia, her voice rising unintentionally.

"No… I don't think it's anything like that. Her stance, the irregularity of her breathing—those aren't the traits of a professional. Besides, a pro wouldn't wait that long after drawing their gun. In that time, there was no conversation with the Boomer either…"

"But in just one shot, and from the look of it, she targeted the Boomer's vitals without hesitation. Aside from being an amateur, Linna's theory is mostly correct. It's certain she was someone from the section who knew the weak points. It seems difficult to access the Boomer's thought systems, but if I search the content of the conversation, I should be able to find out what the Boomer was trying to extract from her. I'll manage that within the next few days."

"Alright! Well, I'm meeting up with Priss, so I'll be going—" Linna said, grabbing a trendy small pocket bag and heading for the elevator.

"Wait a minute, Linna. Can an amateur really do something like this? It doesn't make sense," Nene pressed Sylia with an unconvinced expression.

"That's the point, Nene. The woman's opponent was a spy Boomer for information gathering. And if the woman herself was a GENOM employee…"

As Sylia was speaking, Linna clapped her hands together. "I've got it! This woman was a researcher in the Boomer Development Lab. The Boomer tried to steal new secrets, so it gave her alcohol and invited her to a disco until she was woozy. It took the incoherent woman to a suspicious hotel to try and hear something during 'pillow talk.' But the woman realized the man was a Boomer…"

Sylia stood up and called out to Linna. "This time the results were decent, but nothing starts until we attach this 'Bee Chip' to a Boomer. Since we don't know when a chance will come around, Linna, take one of these with you. Also, tell Priss 'good job' when you see her."

Linna threw the Bee Chip into her pocket bag and energetically left the penthouse.

* * *

What was it that beam orbital satellite No. 126 had missed?

At approximately 18:07 Tinsel City Standard Time, almost exactly when the explosion and fire occurred at the cheap hotel on the border of Districts 6 and 11, something was present near the sea surface south of Tinsel City. Had the satellite not detected the explosion first and turned its camera away, it might have caught that object—though it only showed slight movement, it was clearly a foreign entity.

The Riverfront Bridge, like several other main arteries, was blocked off at the same time the floating city was abandoned due to the failure of the Tokyo Bay Area redevelopment project.

It was such a subtle timing. One could say the object moved specifically to target the gap after the satellite completed its search of Tinsel City and before the next one arrived. In any case, it began to move slowly and cautiously through a place that could not be detected except by an orbital satellite.

South of Tinsel City, in the Tokyo Bay area, a mass of steel occupied about half the space. It was the floating city. Near the Riverfront Bridge, which stretched like a syringe needle from the Kawasaki Industry Zone toward the floating city—that was the approximate location.

However, the floating city and bridge that were supposed to be landmarks had already become husks. On the portions exposed above the sea, steel beams several meters in diameter were twisted like candy, pointing toward the sky. The steel plating was covered in ugly ridges like the thick roots of a giant tree. Furthermore, near the center, the remains of a tragic explosion were visible as a raw, gaping hole filled with dark seawater. One reason it wasn't discovered by the satellite was that it was lost among this vast wreckage.

Until a while ago, that bridge had been a "battlefield" for biker youths. Meaningless turf wars were repeated, and dangerous games became popular. Every night, three or four small shadows would create a new tear in the bridge's guardrail and disappear into the stagnant water below. If one dived while remaining one with their beloved machine until the end, it was called "Supreme Happiness," and they were blessed by friend and foe alike, even if they lost the match.

But it was the Knight Sabers, including Priss—once the undefeated queen of these games—who had taken that freedom away from them. To be precise, in front of the Knight Sabers as they faced a group of Boomers, the USSD beam orbital satellite had struck and destroyed a specialized Boomer that had grotesquely evolved a fusion function, incorporating the entire floating city as part of its body.

The Riverfront Bridge shared the fate of the floating city; its tip plunged into the sea like an elephant's trunk, tilting heavily. Thus, the biker youths' "battlefield" was lost. Perhaps the expression "the Knight Sabers took it away" wasn't appropriate. However, if one considers that only Priss, one of the Knight Sabers, fell into thought for a while after finding the hideously crushed Riverfront Bridge while flipping through photos of the incident, it might be said they were the ones who took it.

* * *

Near that submerged tip of the Riverfront Bridge, something was moving through the dark seawater. It suffered the full brunt of the sewage treatment system that had been paralyzed since the Great Earthquake, yet it proceeded without releasing a single bubble. It slipped through the collapsed bridge piers and headed north, hiding along the wreckage of the floating city.

Inside that object, several silhouettes were moving their limbs. Apparently, they were changing clothes. For some reason, it was in total darkness.

Click. A small light flickered on.

A silhouette with a remarkably massive, muscular build turned around and spoke in a low, husky voice. "What is it, Jane?"

It was an eerie sight, with only the woman's head floating in the light.

"With your head full of nothing but Tinsel City urban strategy data, it’s only natural you wouldn't understand, but this is a standard makeup set for Tinsel City girls. See, you can do your makeup even in this darkness. It’s actually for outdoor dates, but it seems useful in a darkened bedroom too."

The woman staring into the mirror smiled, her thin lips curving slightly. For a fleeting moment, a shockingly cruel expression turned that beautiful face into that of a demon.

"Hmph. You could probably do your makeup without a light."

"Then I’d just be revealing my true identity myself. Now, I can't be bothered with you, Garcia. I have to finish this latest Tinsel City trend makeup quickly."

* * *

The roar of a motorcycle engine vibrated through the lukewarm sea breeze.

"Oh, our Rock Queen has finally made her appearance!" shouted a boy sticking his head out of a window where the glass was broken in places like missing teeth. Without worrying about his neatly slicked-back hair getting messed up, he slid down the handrail of the pipe stairs. By then, the bike had already glided into the building through the large main doors.

"You're late, Priss. Even though it's an important day," a man sitting on a black instrument case said, standing up with sluggish movements and a look of dissatisfaction. His voice echoed against the high ceiling. This was one of the warehouses lined up along the waterfront.

"An important day? Then I assume the song selection and arrangements are all settled. If you had time to dress up in a brand-new leather jacket, that is. Well, how about it?"

Priss said this while flicking the collar of the man's stiff leather jacket with her fingertip.

"B-but, if the leader, Priss, isn't here... hey, guys." The man's tone changed completely to a stutter, and he turned back to seek agreement. Standing there was a stout man with a mustache.

"T-that's right. But we've got the instrument tuning perfect. Even if you suddenly start, we'll back you up properly... whatever song Priss does." Despite his appearance, his voice was high-pitched and nervous. Despite the mustache, he looked like he had barely passed his mid-teens.

"I get it. Then let's head out. If we're late for the appointment, your dreams are toast. This thing isn't usable anymore, right?"

Priss kicked the tire of a beat-up trailer parked at the edge of the garage and walked out of the warehouse. Following her, the four members of Priss's backup band, the Replicants, hurriedly grabbed their respective instruments and chased after her.

* * *

Priss exited the warehouse district and came out onto Canal Street, which ran along the border with the city center. The Replicants finally caught up to her. They assumed Priss would look for a large vehicle to fit everyone along with their instruments, and they set their heavy gear down by the roadside with a sigh of relief.

However, the moment there was a slight break in the flow of cars, Priss quickly crossed to the other side.

"Priiiiiss, where are you going!?" the Replicants called out to her back in a panicked voice.

Having crossed, Priss spun around. "Do you think we can do meetings or sound checks in someone else's car? Just come with me!"

"I see, this is great! There's plenty of space, it'll take us right in front of our destination without us saying a word, and we don't have to worry about 'etiquette.' Most of all, cheap is the best!"

The Replicants shouted their approval as they threw their instruments through the window of a hover bus.

The hover bus had been introduced immediately after the Second Kanto Earthquake seven years ago. Tinsel City had been hit so hard by the magnitude

8 class earthquake that it was once said recovery would be impossible. In particular, traffic, the key to urban function, was significantly delayed because of a massive fault line with a maximum drop of 50 meters that cut through the center of the city. The hover bus was used to ensure the citizens' mobility above all else.

But as the roads were repaired, within a few years, it was treated as a nuisance due to its slowness and bulky size. Now, only a few regular commuter routes remained, serving isolated inland areas or connecting residential zones to industrial production zones.

Priss leaned back in the rear-most seat alone, vaguely watching the Tinsel City nightscape, which flickered as if the great earthquake of seven years ago had returned. This was a regular route bus connecting the isolated, sunless areas known as the "Declining Streets" beneath the fault line. Since it was run by the Welfare Bureau, the fare was dirt cheap—perfect for the Replicants, who had recently been out of work and short on cash.

"Besides, I had no idea a route like this existed. Even with this slow driving, we'll reach the studio the station booked for us in thirty minutes."

"Plus, it's the opposite direction of the guys coming back from the Industry Zone, so it's empty. We can play drums to our heart's content."

Just then, a three-story super-expressway appeared ahead. With a synthetic voice announcing, "We are crossing an obstacle, everyone please be careful," the hover bus transitioned into its first hovering maneuver.

"I remember this announcement. It's the same as when I rode it as a kid."

"Isn't it exhilarating that a 'super-expressway' is an 'obstacle'? To this bus, it's no different from a pile of rubble or a fault line!"

As they swayed on their seats to the vibration of the lifting hover bus, the Replicants all cheered like children.

Priss was lost in thought. Seven years ago...

At that time, Priss, who was already in an orphanage, had desperately escaped the burning building. She had lost track of the "teachers" who were leading them. Or perhaps she had left the group herself. She couldn't stand the wealthy or powerful giving her food and clothes with faces that screamed "I'm a good person," and she couldn't tolerate days of ease spent basking in a sunroom.

So, Priss, who had leapt out into the city of rubble, had embraced the sense of liberation with her whole body. Children separated from their parents were not uncommon, and unless they sought it out themselves, they weren't put into protective facilities.

However, Priss had one companion. A girl who looked up to Priss like an older sister and always stuck to her. The two walked through the ruined Tinsel City in search of food. Priss, though only a year or two past ten, was precocious and possessed a natural wild survival instinct that helped her keep the girl alive for months.

But the end came suddenly.

One day, while working among rough day laborers, the girl who came to meet Priss in the evening accidentally called out "Big Sis!" Priss had cut her hair short and wrapped a towel tightly around her budding chest, working while pretending to be a boy. That effort crumbled in an instant because of that single word.

"So, you were a girl. You did a good job fooling us until now."

"Hey, I don’t feel like taking your job away. On the contrary, we’ll all give you a little tip. If you just lie down in that shack and endure it for an hour, that’s all."

"Right..."

Sunburned, half-naked, sweaty men reached out toward Priss with vulgar smiles on their faces...

The hover bus landed with a dull thud. Priss suddenly snapped back to reality.

"Whoa! As I thought, riding a vintage model is life-threatening," one of the Replicants said in a pathetic voice as he rolled off his seat. The pneumatic compressor made a loud hissing noise and didn't move immediately, leading them to think it was a breakdown, but it was actually a bus stop.

The door opened, and a child in dirty overalls, wearing a hunting cap pulled down low, timidly climbed on.

"Ellen!" Priss shouted toward the child before she realized it.

That child looked exactly like the girl who appeared in the memory she had just been immersed in. The profile with lingering innocence, the anxious gaze exactly like when searching for Priss... even the clothes resembled the outfit Priss used to have the girl wear.

"A kid you know, Priss?" the Replicants asked, looking back and forth between the two with puzzled eyes.

"N-no, I must have mistaken them for someone else," Priss hurriedly corrected.

The child looked even more anxious and sat in a nearby seat, almost falling over as the bus accelerated.

"What, is that it? Priss suddenly shouted, so I was surprised." A teasing laugh spread among the Replicants.

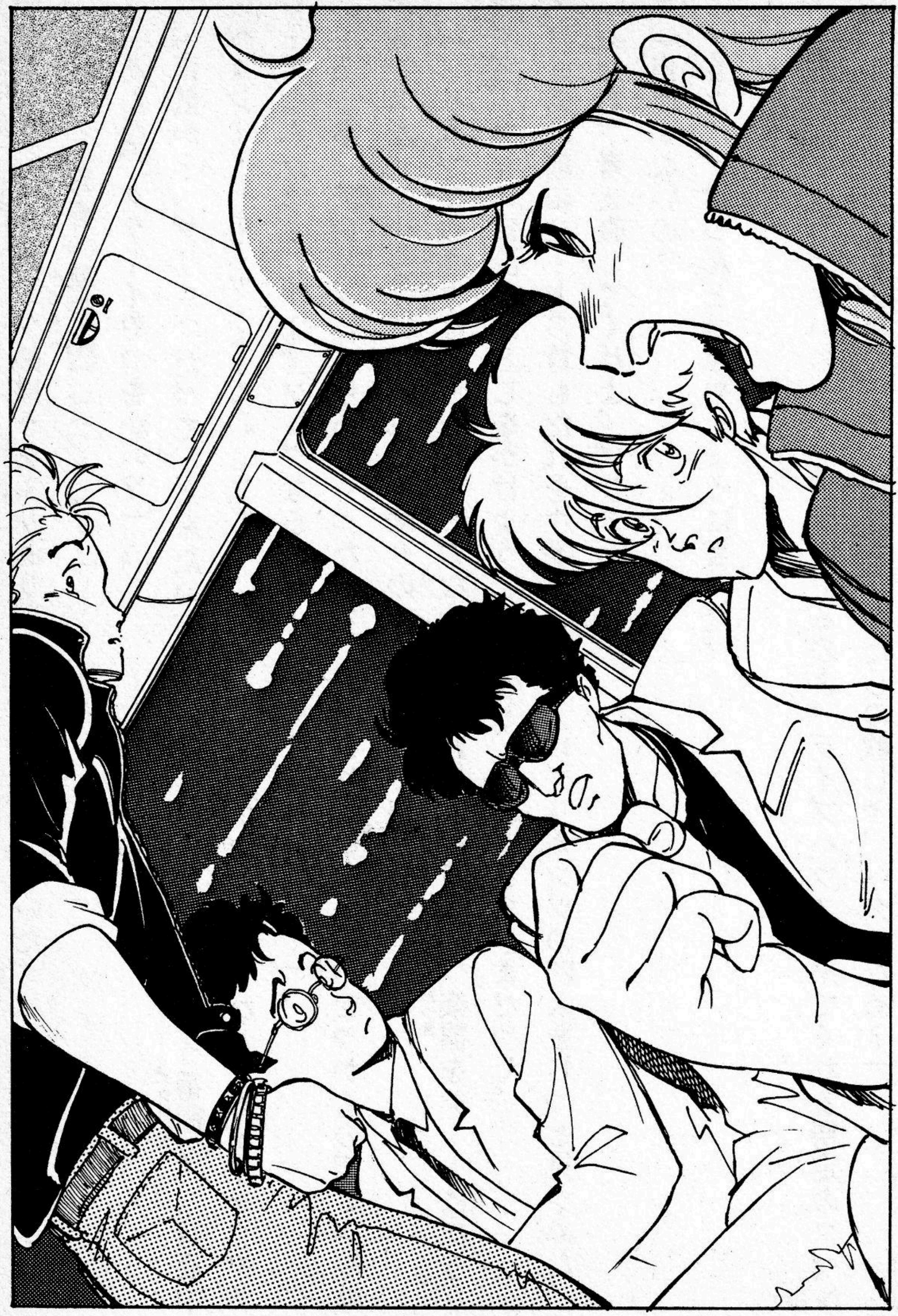
"You guys, never mind that. Is the song selection finished? If we don't decide on the arrangement by the time we get to the studio, we won't be able to record in time!"

When Priss spoke sharply, the Replicants became embarrassed by their earlier excitement and silently pulled their instruments out of their cases. Eventually, a noisy consultation began. Priss sat in a forward seat and stared once more at the child from before while listening to the strumming of guitars and the banging of drums echoing through the hover bus.

It was natural for the Replicants to find it strange. The child Priss had called "Ellen"—a girl's name—looked like nothing but a boy.

(There's no way it's Ellen. Ellen was two years younger than me; she'd be a grown woman of sixteen or seventeen by now. Yes, if she were alive...)

Ellen was dead. Seeing Priss being stripped by the powerful men, Ellen had charged at them to save her without knowing what was happening. She was effortlessly brushed aside by a bloodshot man and fell into a deep hole next to the shack. Priss went into a frenzy, grabbed a nearby iron bar, and knocked two of them down. The rest fled in panic. Ellen had hit her head and died instantly. Priss buried the remains in another hole and erected a small cross over it—one that was likely crushed by a bulldozer immediately after…



"Let's do 'Epitaph of Youth'—"

Priss had said it to the Replicants before she knew it.

"Gack, 'Epitaph of Youth'!?"

"That dark one?"

"Are you serious, Priss? I mean, the catchphrase for the program your friend Linna is doing is 'Midnight Aerobics,' right? If it's a theme song, it has to be flashy…"

"Ah, geez. No matter how much we tweak the arrangement, there's no way it'll be adopted. Even though this is our big chance for a debut, we won't even get bus fare back home with this…"

The members of the Replicants reacted in various ways—some slumped powerlessly on the floor, some threw their instruments onto seats, and some tried to plead with Priss. Priss grabbed the back of the front seat with one hand and stared intently at the four of them.

"Hey, reconsider, Priss."

"Don't you have confidence?"

"Eh—"

Priss said it as if muttering to herself.

"I'm asking if you don't have confidence in that song. Is it a song that only has persuasive power for specific fans who come to the concert house? Or is my singing bad and no good?"

"…No, that's not it. It's not that Priss's singing is bad. Her songs have an appeal that could reach anyone. But in this case, the target is…"

"Shouldn't we just let the people hiring decide how to use the song? If the song is good and the performance is great, won't they find a way to use it? No—wouldn't a performance like that give them so much inspiration that they'd have endless ideas on how to use it?"

"Well…" The man began to argue, but he fell silent halfway through.

Priss's mouth opened slightly.

"Children of a time that forgot us… lost children racing down the Maglev Freeway…"

Priss began to sing quietly, as if speaking to the crowds outside the bus who were engaged in an all-night revelry through the city streets. It was "Epitaph of Youth," a song she had written while remembering the nights she spent racing her bike across the Riverfront Bridge.

The support from the Replicants was perfect. Even though the vibrations were reaching her, Priss felt as if she were in a world of silence. But then, a mysterious melody drifted in. It was a thin, raspy sound—a flute?

If the Replicants' performance was a current that allowed Priss's voice to float and flow without stagnation, the sound of the flute felt like it was walking beside her song, nodding in agreement with every single word.

But then, a mysterious melody began to drift in. It was a thin, raspy sound. If the Replicants' performance was like a smooth, unhindered current carrying Priss's voice aloft, this flute's tone seemed to walk right beside her song, nodding "yes, yes" to every single word.

(A flute—?)

"If only I could have written those words—"

During the instrumental break, Priss pressed her cheek against the window glass. A single tear welled in her eye, shimmering like a rainbow as it caught the multicolored lights of the city before spilling onto the seat. Priss, who had been leaning her body into the music, looked around the bus to find the source of that sound.

As the final refrain ended, the sound of the flute quietly faded away. A white, rod-like object made of wood or bamboo...

The gaudy neon of the slums and the glare of halogen floodlights dyed Priss's profile through the grimy windows of the hover-bus. She looked almost like a prostitute wearing heavy makeup.

And yet, it was a haunting beauty. The man who had been about to argue felt as if it were the first time he had ever seen Priss look so beautiful.

The man in the brand-new leather jacket pulled his guitar close and softly strummed the chords to match the song.

"What are you racing toward in such a hurry?" The lights flickered in intervals—blue to red, red to green, green to purple—and every time the colors clash, trying to claim a piece of Priss's face, the 'makeup' of the light seemed to grow deeper.

"If you, who vanished into the dark sea and scattered into the void, could see what you finally overtook… I just wanted you to scream, 'I saw it'…"

It was a funeral dirge dedicated to a fallen comrade. The Replicants were in perfect sync now, the entire band backing up Priss's song. The more they hid behind their bizarre makeup and stage costumes, the more the clownish absurdity drifted into a strange, profound sadness.

(It’s that kid…)

The Replicants had stopped playing without realizing it, and were staring at the back of the young musician who was turned away from them, playing that rare instrument with everything they had.

"To a crucifix that suits you…"

As if drawn in by the flute, Priss began to sing again. The accompaniment was the sound of the flute. The young player’s fingers were small but slender and elegant. Because the child was sitting deep in the seat, keeping their back straight, their neatly aligned feet were poised on tiptoe. The whiteness of the nape of their neck as they leaned forward slightly was almost painful to look at.

Priss's face, so heavily "applied" with light that her expression was indistinguishable, held a hidden power that appealed directly to the heart. There was a taut tension in the air, yet a relaxed, drifting rhythm that didn't contradict it. Through the few open windows, the clamor of the city flowed in, along with the hollow thrumming of the old hover-bus engine.

Chapter 3

"You…"

The dirty hunting cap turned around, revealing an innocent smile beneath it. The Replicants burst into applause at once, raising a deafening cheer of "Bravo! Bravo!"

The child tucked the instrument against their chest and walked toward Priss and the others. Priss smiled and held out one hand. A small hand was reached out in return.

At that moment, a massive impact suddenly hit the hover-bus.

The Replicants' instruments crashed into each other with a clatter, and some people were thrown into the front seats. Priss, still in the posture of having her hand reached out, grabbed the child and lay flat on the dirty, blackened floor.

"A-an earthquake? Or did this beat-up hover-bus finally give out?"

One of the Replicants shouted irritably.

Crack!

There was an unpleasant sound, and a scream rose from the very front of the bus. It was the driver's voice. He was a stocky man with a grumpy, bulldog-like face, but he had been driving silently as if such a commotion was common in the dangerous slums or entertainment districts where the hover-bus operated.

Priss, shielding the child under her arm, twisted her neck and looked up at the front.

"B-Boomer—!"

Priss cried out involuntarily.

Because it's necessary to rise while watching for overhead obstacles during hovering, the driver's cockpit is elevated and surrounded by large glass panes like a sunroom. A fine, spiderweb-like network of cracks ran across that large glass. And from the center of that spiderweb, the terrifying face of a Boomer—resembling a dull, metallic mask or a skull—was peeking in.

The driver wasn’t trying to escape. The man had clearly been paralyzed with fear long ago. The Boomer grabbed the driver's neck with a giant hand and lifted him into the air.

Snap.

The driver's head slumped. Under the Boomer's terrifying strength, his neck had been effortlessly snapped. Then, the massive body was hurled toward them with incredible force. The driver's body bounced in front of Priss’s eyes, twitched a few times, and then went still.

"H-how cruel…"

"Hey, that Boomer's planning to come in!"

One of the Boomer’s hands grabbed the window frame, while the other wandered inside the cockpit seeking a firmer hold.

"You've killed the driver, and now you think We’re going to let you get inside? Not today, You brazen Boomer!"

The Replicant with the slicked-back hair used the driver's corpse as a stepping stone and leaped forward.

"Joe, watch out!" Priss shouted.

The Boomer's hand that had been wandering in the air disappeared outside the window for a moment, then came back like a black mass with a whistle of cutting air. The back of the driver's seat was blown away and pierced through like a Frisbee.

Joe, who had dodged the backrest by curling up on the backmost seat where Priss had been just moments ago, rolled under the driver's seat and reached out with all his might to press down on one of the pedals.

Instantly, a mechanical roar rose from beneath the floor, and fine vibrations were transmitted to Priss’s body. The neon signs and hologram advertisement towers outside the window slowly descended while turning to the right.

"J-Joe, what's going on!?"

"Isn't it obvious? I made it hover! Bobby, get over here and grab the wheel. I'm going to knock this Boomer off!"

Joe pulled a large wrench from the tool chest under the driver's seat and desperately struck the Boomer's hand, which was firmly gripping the window frame, four or five times.

"B-but…"

Bobby, a sturdily built man with his T-shirt rolled up to his shoulders, crawled toward the driver's seat with his knees shaking.

"You idiot! If you don't hurry, the bus will crash into a building!"

Joe shouted while still striking. However, the Boomer's hand, armored with ultra-high-density Avotech shielding, didn't budge.

"Bobby, get to the cockpit! Joe, it's no use aiming for the Boomer. Break the window frame!" Priss shouted.Priss shouted while bracing her feet against the seat. Because the hover-bus had risen while the Boomer was hanging on, it began to tilt gradually under the Boomer's weight.

Joe swung the wrench sideways with all his strength.

Just as the sound of heavy metal snapping rang out, the hover-bus lifted the front end that had been sinking. Although the whole bus momentarily lost its balance and shook violently, thanks to the efforts of the machine-crazy Bobby, who had taken the wheel, it somehow regained its equilibrium.

Priss looked down from the window.

"Don't get cocky. Land nearby quickly. Otherwise, we'll become the Boomer's target!"

"Everyone, get down!"

"Alright! That Boomer is sinking into the street and struggling. Bobby, now's our chance to escape!"

The hover-bus, now lightened, gained altitude significantly.

Priss shouted in a desperate voice, pressing down hard on the hunting cap of the child she was hugging.

At that moment, a more powerful impact than anything before hit the hover-bus. Just as a brilliant emerald-green light crawled up from under the seat on the right-middle side of the bus, it evaporated one seat in an instant and pierced through the ceiling in a round pillar of light.

It was likely a small laser cannon built into the Boomer.

The bus tilted sharply and suddenly. Two or three of the ten hover-engines must have been blown away. Recovering its posture was virtually impossible——. In the next instant after she made that judgment, Priss's feet were already on the window frame before she was even conscious of it. They were some 30 meters above the ground, and their footing was a hover-bus rapidly losing control and sliding sideways. There was no time for calculation. Her innate wild instincts simply commanded her to escape this place immediately, even a second sooner. Clutching the child, Priss threw herself into the empty air without hesitation.

When it came down to wild intuition, there was a man here who had a confidence second to none. He had been cruising down Canal Street, moving from the habitation zone toward the starless night sky, when he caught the emerald-green beam at the corner of his eye. His eye twitched and his brow moved.

The interchange was right there. Without hesitation, the man forced the Road Chaser from the straight lane into the adjacent down-ramp. The "lane change possible" zone had, of course, long since passed.

"Hey, are you crazy? That's dangerous!?"

The driver of the car immediately behind him leaned out of his window and roared.

"Hmph, if you've got time to yell at me, then go home and watch some 3D TV instead!"

The man spat back without a care and, without dropping his speed, plunged into the ribbon-shaped curve. Within a few seconds, the Road Chaser had entered a somewhat dingy district within the habitation zone.

"Around here, maybe...?"

He switched the car stereo, which had been blasting high-energy hard rock, over to the police radio.

"...Station One to all patrol cars. A civilian report of a Boomer appearance in the habitation zone on the east side of Cliffside. We are rushing to the scene. Furthermore, the exact location is currently being confirmed. Please stand by for further contact..."

A woman in uniform appeared on the console's visi-phone screen, busily brushing her bangs away from her face.

She spoke in a business-like tone.

"Tch, it seems all she has on her mind is her late-night date with her boyfriend."

Clicking his tongue lightly, the man flipped the microphone switch to the 'on' position. Ahead of the Road Chaser, the roadway was overflowing with people, and the wave was surging toward him. Every face was distorted with terror; there was no semblance of order.

"This is AD Police 102. Station One, do you copy? I've spotted the Boomer! It's in District 3, Block 9 of the Habitation Zone, right in the middle of the Cliffside second entertainment district. Send urgent backup!"

As he shouted into the mic, the man leaped from the Road Chaser with his handgun at the ready. He waded into the mass of people who had fallen into a panic, pressing through the screams, shouts, roars, and the blaring of car horns.

"Out of the way! It's the AD Police! Anyone obstructing our path will not have their life guaranteed! State the Boomer's position immediately!"

The man's powerful voice echoed through the night streets, overwhelming the swarming crowd. Like cold water being thrown on them, a rift opened up in the center of the human wave. The man ran fifty or sixty meters in one breath. As if chasing the man, voices could be heard.

"It's the hover-bus! The hover-bus is being attacked!"

The man looked up. A single hover-bus was tilting as if grazing the building on the left side, falling slowly. It seemed some of its hovering engines were dead, and it no longer had the buoyancy to support its massive frame. It scraped against the building repeatedly, sending out sparks like a welding machine and emitting a sickening metallic screech. Laundry that had been hanging in the windows below the bus fluttered away one after another, caught in the gale blowing from the engines.

(Please, just hold out until I take care of the Boomer.)

The man searched for the Boomer while whispering the plea in his heart. The Boomer was dragging its leg as it systematically destroyed things in its vicinity. A holographic clip of a new idol singer singing and dancing was struck by a laser. The advertising tower burst into flames. A middle-aged man who had jumped out of the hover-bus rolled onto the sidewalk, his sheets engulfed in flames like a fireball. A neon sign was blown away. Was it from the car?

(What the, this guy... it's not even aiming at anything. I've never heard of a Boomer losing its mind like this!)

At that moment, the hover-bus finally crashed. Beneath its massive frame, several artificial roadside trees were crushed flat. The bus plowed into the front half of a game center, wedging itself between the artificial trees and the building at an angle as it impacted the ground.

As if spilling out of the bus, a man in a leather jacket tumbled onto the sidewalk. Then, he scrambled away from the bus as it went up in flames, crawling as if to escape.

The Boomer's search sensors quickly detected the man's movement and its neck swiveled around. From deep within the Boomer's mouth, an emerald-green laser beam was spat out. The artificial trees next to the man were engulfed in flames in an instant.

"Rick—!"

A shout was heard from the building on the opposite side. Looking up, a woman in leather racing suit stood atop a wide, overhanging shade made of biosynthetic fiber. She had pulled a child close to her.

The Boomer heard the cry and slowly turned its body.

The woman and child noticed and struggled to flee, but on top of the biosynthetic fiber—a material known for its distinctive fluffiness—they could only move with agonizing slowness. The woman seemed to have resigned herself, clutching the child tightly as she glared back at the Boomer. It was as if she were daring the Boomer to flinch.

The man quickly aimed his handgun at the Boomer and fired. The Boomer's body staggered slightly from the impact.

(Now's the chance—)

The man turned toward the shade and aimed his handgun at its support pillar. He fired. The bullet struck the pillar perfectly.

With a snap, the shade gently tilted. The woman and child tumbled onto the ground. At that same moment, the shade was engulfed in flames. Even though it had gone berserk, the Boomer's relentless nature meant it never let a targeted prey escape; it continued to fire lasers at the two.

The man fired another suppressive shot at the Boomer and ran toward the pair.

"Are you okay!?" the man bellowed.

The woman, who had been ducking low to protect the child, brushed her long hair out of her face and looked up at the man.

"Priss— aren't you Priss!?"

For a moment, Priss forgot she was being targeted by a Boomer and stared at the man standing before her.

"Ah, you're—"

"It's me, Leon from the AD Police. Leon McNichol. Don't tell me you've forgotten. You know, your most passionate fan!"

The man seemed equally oblivious to the Boomer. Moreover, he beamed with a look of joy and gave a shy, bashful grin.

At that moment, a nearby pipe table caught the emerald-green beam, making a sizzling sound as it melted and collapsed.

"Whoops, I was so happy to see you, Priss, that I completely forgot about that Boomer bastard. Hey, hurry up and run. Once that jerk sets his sights on you, he's incredibly persistent—"

As he spoke, the man fired another shot at the Boomer.

Then, a rhythmic *pata-pata* mechanical sound could be heard from overhead. It was "Firebee." Four AD Police portable combat helicopters had deployed at distances that wouldn't interfere with each other's movements and were circling while aiming their 20mm Vulcan cannons at the Boomer.

The first helicopter to close in passed over the Boomer's head and let loose its Vulcan cannon. The area around the Boomer's feet was suddenly enveloped in bursts of orange light as fragments of laminated asphalt flew everywhere. However, they narrowly missed the Boomer's body.

"Ggaarrgh!"

The Boomer opened its mouth wide and roared. It was a hideous expression, one that could be mistaken for an ogre's mask. The Boomer twisted its body toward the helicopter attempting a quick getaway and spread both arms wide to the left and right. It looked as though it were expressing its rage with its entire being.

However, that was no mere pose. It was the stance the Boomer took when unleashing the absolute maximum offensive power it possessed.

The armor plating on the Boomer’s abdomen, shoulders, chest, and both arms slid open. Simultaneously, intense heat rays were fired from each of those points.

The portable helicopter, which had its back turned to the Boomer while in a breakaway posture, was struck across its entire frame by the heat rays before it had a chance to evade. It plummeted to the ground, trailing a mass of black smoke and writhing in flames.

"Kyaaa!"

The child let out a high-pitched scream and clung to Priss.

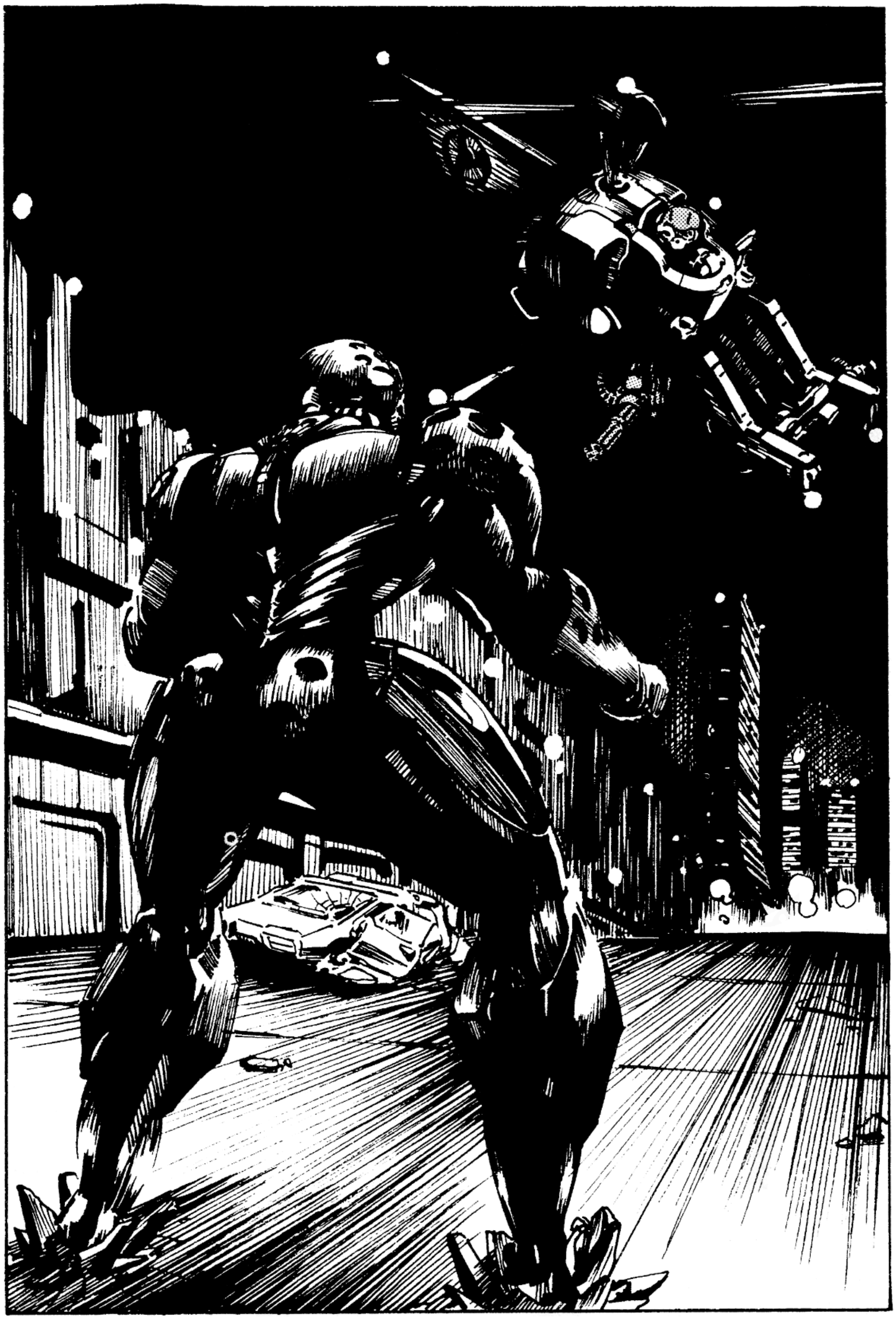
Leon urged Priss along as they ran toward the Road Chaser.

"Damn, this is unbearable. If we stick around for a fight between machines, we won’t last. Priss, you’re not going to say it’s hard to part with that Boomer bastard, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. This isn't the time for that. Just get the car out of here. We’re still that thing’s primary target!"

"Whoa, you sure know your Boomers… well, whatever. Safety first. Hey, you better hold on tight!"

Leon spoke to Priss and the child she brought with her as they tumbled into the rear seats. Then, as if to show off his prideful driving technique, he executed a flashy turn with the Road Chaser and…



…sped away, leaving the street—which had become as deserted as a ghost town in the blink of an eye due to the Boomer's appearance—behind them.

(Is this guy serious, or is he just a total airhead… he's completely ridiculous.)

According to Nene, who works at the AD Police, this man's name is Leon McNichol. He is supposedly the leader of the patrol unit in the A-Class AD Police. Priss knew that he had been frequenting the live house for some time, but she didn't care for his frivolous, womanizing attitude—such as the time he'd asked her out to dinner once or twice just to fish for information regarding the incident where the USSD's beam orbital satellite destroyed the floating city.

"Looks like that crazy Boomer bastard has finally quieted down," Leon said while lighting a cigarette.

The car was traveling at ultra-high speed and was already far from the previous district. A notification regarding the Boomer's suppression had come through on Leon's handheld vision phone.

"I wonder if he's taking Priss to meet her friends because he's chasing a Boomer?" Leon mused, driving skillfully to the district where the studio was located, where Linna was waiting. The hover-bus he had seen leaping between building windows to escape—operated by the "talented" Replicant pilot, Bobby—had apparently landed safely.

"You say you have nowhere to go? Then, what about your parents?"

When Priss asked, the child shook their head and clung tightly to Priss. Their shoulders were still trembling slightly.

"It's okay now, the monster isn't coming after us anymore."

Saying this, Priss hugged the child back.

(Hmm…?)

Through Priss's arms wrapped around the child's body, she felt a soft fullness. As Priss adjusted the child's dirty hunting cap, silky hair spilled onto the child's shoulders, having come undone during the earlier commotion. A ribbon fell onto the child's lap, having been hidden until then.

"You… were a girl?"

When Priss whispered this, the girl looked at Priss with pleading eyes and gave a small nod. There seemed to be some kind of circumstance. Priss didn't refuse to help simply because she hated the police; it wasn't just because Leon had suggested that "if she's a lost child or a runaway, she should be sent to the Juvenile Division."

"Priss, I've been so anxious wondering when you'd show up!"

Linna, who had been sitting on a hard bench in front of the mixing room entrance, let out a high-pitched voice upon seeing Priss. She pulled Priss behind an old-fashioned cola vending machine. While she lowered her voice so as not to be heard by those around them, her tone remained sharp and urgent.

"—Why were you so late? No, I don't care about the reason. There's less than an hour left of studio time! Oh, where are the others? They're coming later? Priss, I don't care about Boomers or whatever. Right now we're talking about business. The owner of the broadcasting station is here too. If this recording goes well and my song gets picked up for the program, Tinsel City Hit Chart—no, even the World Chart isn't just a dream. If that happens, of course, you'll be a star overnight. No, I'll be a Top DJ too. We'll both ride that gorgeous wave to stardom... Hey, Priss, are you listening to me seriously?"

"I'm listening. But I don't really care about becoming a star. You said you wanted a song with a little more punch for your DJ gig, Linna, so I just said 'sure.' The Replicants..."

"...probably have some pretty naive expectations too, but that's not it..."

"I know what you want to say. If you have a backer like that, you're set. That's why if you make one big hit, you can just quit. There are plenty of musicians in Tinsel City who have both the technique and the sense but are far below the Replicants—"

Linna got that far before someone poked her in the back. She spun around.

"You say that with such a pretty face, huh? Jeez, big sister. What about us then?"

The one speaking with a smirk was Rick, wearing his leather jacket. Behind him were Joe, Bobby, and the drummer, John.

"Oh, you're already here—"

Linna covered her embarrassment with a forced smile while breaking into a cold sweat.

"Don't give me that 'already' stuff. We know there's no time, so we've already finished warming up while you were busy dealing with that Boomer."

Joe spoke while holding a guitar that only had two strings left.

"But, the instruments—what about the instruments?" Linna asked hurriedly.

The Replicants' appearance after fighting the Boomer until the end was truly miserable. Bobby was still bleeding from his elbow, and John was dragging his leg. It was a miracle they had managed to escape the hover-bus at all.

"Even if it's a cheap studio, they at least have a piano and some basic rhythm instruments. If we have those, we're fine. The arrangement is perfectly set. Right, Priss?"

Bobby said this and gave Priss a wink.

The Replicants entered the recording room with a boisterous clamor. Behind the glass in the mixing room, three men were present, and Linna was desperately trying to persuade them with a business smile and a humble attitude. The four Replicants didn't seem to care at all, chatting and joking around as they set up their instruments. Joe finished stringing his spare guitar, Rick sat down at the upright piano chair, and John found an old pair of maracas from somewhere.

"Priss, we're ready to go. The rest is up to you—"

Priss leaned against an acoustic bass and gestured with her eyes toward the girl sitting in the corner of the studio.

Priss beckoned the girl into the center of the floor.

"You, what's your name?"

Priss bent down and asked gently, meeting the girl at eye level.

"My name is Elenidira."

"I see, Elenidira. There was a girl Big Sister knew a long time ago named Elen, and she looked a lot like you."

"Our names are similar, too. What happened to her... that girl?"

Priss's expression darkened for a moment, but then she looked up and smiled as if she had reconsidered.

"She died. She was always with me, though."

"Then, I'll stay by your side instead of her."

"Thank you. Will you let me hear that beautiful sound from earlier once more, Elenidira?"

The girl gave a deep nod. From halfway through Priss and Elenidira's conversation, a piano sound so faint it was almost unnoticeable had been playing the melody of 'Epitaph of Youth.'

There, the bass, guitar, piano, and maracas matched their breathing perfectly and started the performance. Part of it was the acoustic instrument arrangement, but the hearts and expectations of the members aligned to create an atmosphere that waited for the rising connection between Priss and Elenidira.

The sound of the girl's flute seemed to snuggle up to Priss's voice, as if nodding to Priss's words.

When the performance finally ended, Linna, who had realized it, hurriedly ran down from the side door.

"H-hey, Priss! Surely you aren't saying that was the theme song I ordered!"

"That's the plan."

As if in agreement with Priss, the members of the Replicants all nodded lightly at once.

"B-but—even Priss said it! That songs these days have no guts because they're calculated by computers. Why didn't you make it something with more punch? This will ruin the image of my program, which is supposed to sell bursting energy and freshness!"

"I wonder about that," Joe said in a spaced-out voice. "Linna's midnight DJing is for young people in the prime of their youth, right? Being in 'youth' doesn't mean you're always in a happy mood. If you're going to appeal to 'youth,' you have to first make the people listening feel like, 'Ah, I'm living my youth.'"

"If you think that kind of easygoing talk will fly in this Tinsel City—"

Just as Linna was about to lash out with a bright red face, someone stopped her from the side. Among the three men who had been standing in the mixing room, it was the man who had been the most offended by Priss and the others arriving late to the studio and had the sourest expression.

"Yamazaki-kun, what he says may be unexpectedly true. There's no need to limit the fans to 'energetic youth' from the start. They just need to become energetic while listening to your lighthearted and lively chatter. The sentiment toward 'youth' certainly exists in middle-aged people like us as well. This song has a universal 'appeal to youth' in that sense."

"I think this track has real spirit. It might even broaden the show's fan base. What do you think, Producer?"

The man in charge of programming turned to the stern-looking man of similar age standing beside him.

"Yeah. I've handled my share of hits, but it's been a long time since I felt something with this much appeal. The acoustic arrangement is fresh, and above all, that unusual instrument adds an exotic mood that works perfectly. This will be a hit, for sure. My only concern is whether they can recreate that indescribable tension we just felt during the actual recording session..."

"You don't need to worry about that. The recording is perfect."

A young man in casual clothes cut in from the side. "Ah, I'm the engineer. While Linna was asking the owner and producer for a delay because the instruments weren't ready, I was casually listening to the sound on the floor. I didn't want to hear Linna getting yelled at—the owner isn't the type to forgive that kind of slack. Oh, excuse me. Anyway, the melody the piano started playing was so interesting that I secretly started the digital recorder. That one take is more than enough. No retakes necessary."

"Is that so? Well done, Yamazaki-kun. You never know what might turn out to be a blessing. We'll use it as the theme for next week's premiere. I'll even consider a disc release, members of the Replicants."

The man in the suit, addressed as the Owner, spoke with authority. The members of the Replicants and Linna widened their eyes in disbelief.

"A disc? Oh, that'll work!" the young engineer chimed in again. "To commemorate the opening of Genom's new satellite broadcasting network, the 'World Folk Music Festival' is being held on a grand scale next week. I'm actually involved in that project. It's the first network to cover every nation and region on Earth. The number of participants is massive, and entries are still pouring in. Among my colleagues, there's a rumor that this will trigger a big change in music—that things with an exotic, foreign mood will be huge. If this song makes it to disc, it'll be the first of its kind. It's guaranteed to sell!"

The young man spoke passionately to the producer and the owner. Linna and the Replicants, their previous awkwardness vanished, held hands and frolicked around the studio, cheering. Only one person remained with a dark, clouded expression: Priss.

(Hit songs, discs, stardom, money... I didn't start singing for things like that. My joy was singing and speaking to the people right in front of me, being encouraged by their reactions, and sharing time and space as one with the crowd filling the concert houses. I understand the Replicants' excitement and Linna's happiness, but...)

Priss bit her lip. Amidst the celebratory atmosphere, the only one watching her was the young girl, Elendira, whose two eyes were filled with an uneasy, searching expression.

* * *

At the same time, on the streets of Tinsel City's Ninth District, the roads were a complex, winding maze. People of various races—White, Black, and Asian—pressed together in surprising proximity, conversing in a jumble of multiple languages.

This area was commonly known as "The Market." Decades ago, the name of a nearby skyscraper related to imports and exports had simply become the name of the district. Back then—before the global information revolution—Asian ethnic groups, primarily Chinese and Filipinos, had begun leaving their homelands to settle here, drawn by the economic prosperity of the industrial giant, Japan.

After the information revolution, diverse peoples from all over the world streamed into the city. While the flow of data and capital was hard to see with the naked eye, the secondary phenomenon—the influx of human beings—was far more conspicuous. In this city that had become "TOKYO," this district served as the hub for that population surge.

However, the foreigners gathered here weren't just those involved in information flow or mega-corporations. There were many immigrants from Africa, Central and South America, and Asia who had no direct connection to industrial or economic data. The revolution of information flow wasn't limited to the framework of the global economy; it brought inevitable, massive changes to social systems and the structures of nations. It was only natural that the first signs appeared in TOKYO, the world's largest source and entry point of information.

Considering Japan's history as a unique, mono-ethnic nation, this was both an unbelievable event and proof of how the revolution of "systems" was a world-shaking incident that uprooted the very aspect of the globe.

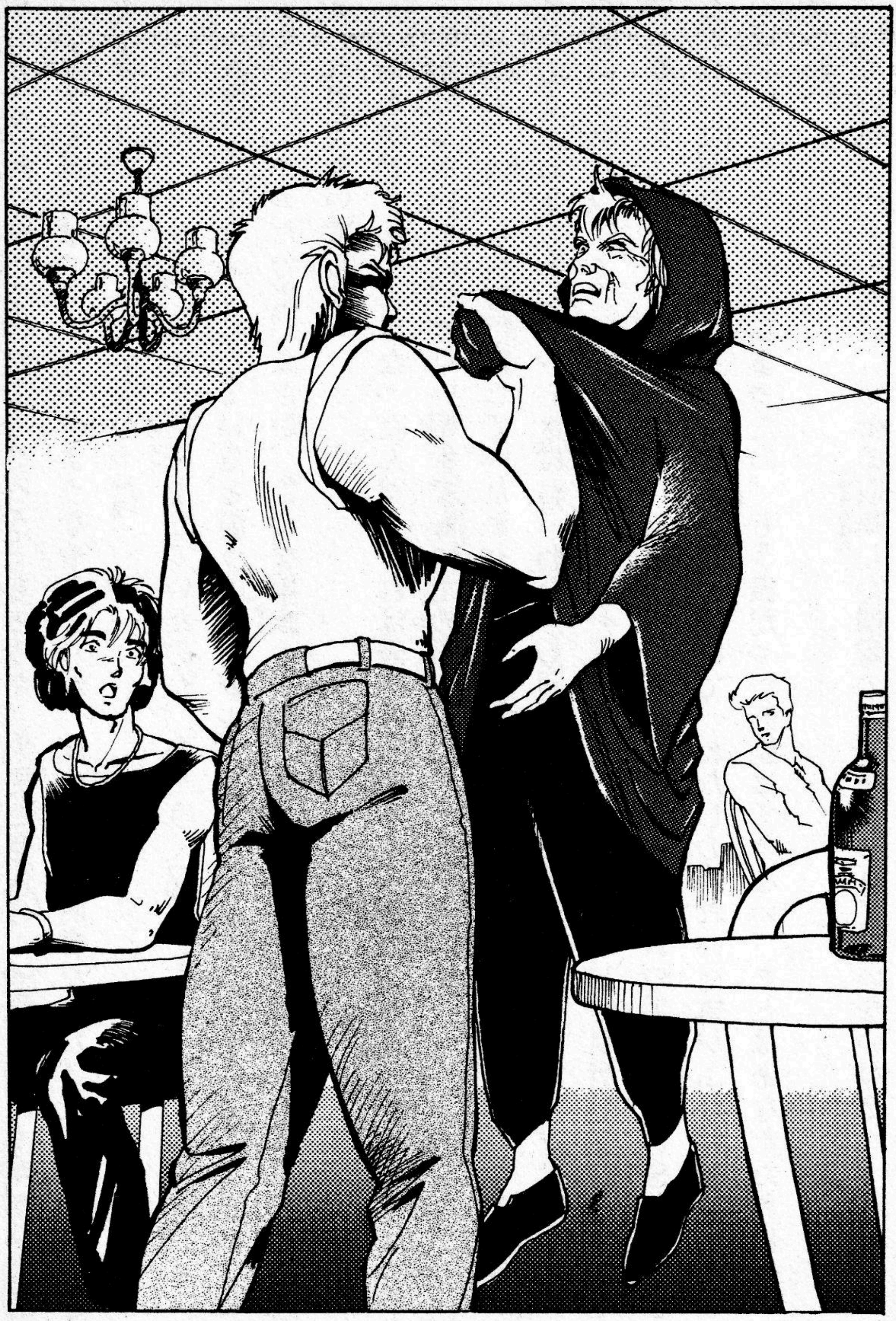
The reason this block of the Ninth District was called "The Market"—a word with a suspicious, vulgar ring—was partly because the mixture of races from every corner of the world was reminiscent of the "Black Markets" once used for human trafficking during the colonial era.

From nuclear warheads to "Super Coke"—a hyper-hallucinogen created by the latest biotechnology—it seemed there was nothing one couldn't find here. It was truly a modern-day secret market.

From a street corner as bright as day where queues of people never ended, a few dozen meters down a dead-end alley, sat a cheap underground bar. An unkempt old man sat there, muttering gibberish over a glass of "Panda Killer"—a cocktail of tequila and lao-chu cut with the Russian soft drink, kvass.

The men loitering around him were of various races and ages, but all shared the same destitute, derelict appearance. The bar was in a similar state of ruin. Only the high ceiling hinted at better days, but now it only added to the chilling desolation. Even the local streetwalkers refused to set foot inside, knowing they wouldn't make any money and would likely end up as victims of a gang assault. Such places, however, were nothing unusual in the Market district.

A well-built man dressed like a laborer entered the bar. He scanned the interior with a sharp gaze and walked slowly toward the counter. In the narrow passage between tables, the old man's legs were sloppily sprawled out. The man tripped over them and stumbled. However, rather than leaning on anyone nearby or reaching for a table or chair, he kicked the floor hard just as his lunging body was about to hit the ground. He spun through the air over the heads of the drunken men and landed in a small, empty space.



A stir went through the room, but the man didn't look proud. He walked straight to the old man, grabbed his scrawny neck with a large hand, and hoisted him up as if twisting him. The laborer shouted at the old man in a gravelly Latin language. The old man, struggling in his arms, continued to scream incomprehensible mutters in what sounded like Hindi.

The scene looked like a ridiculous brawl between a Samson and a fallen saint. The surrounding crowd erupted in vulgar laughter and jeering. The man, having vented his frustration through a one-sided lecture, tossed the old man back onto his chair and walked out of the bar.

The scene, hardly rare, seemed to do nothing more than liven up the bar's atmosphere and prompt a few more orders of drinks, making the staff smirk. However, if a more cautious observer had been present, they would have noticed not only the man's extraordinary physical movements but also the fact that the old man's thin leg had kicked the man's foot hard enough to knock down a person of that stature.

And, of course, no one there knew that the exchange between the giant and the old man—which seemed like two people shouting past each other—actually contained the following:

"What is this, Maria? Why are you dressed like this?"

"Do you think I like being this way, Garcia? I wanted to stay beautiful as I was. You wouldn't think information on that secret project would be available in a backwater bar like this, would you?"

"How did you end up like that?"

"I won't be able to return to my original form. This is the final stage metamorphosis. Was there someone you couldn't get close to unless you looked like this?"

"The opposite. Jose, who was working with me, was taken out. He was in bed with a Genom woman involved in the secret project. I was in another room in the same hotel, and when I tried to rush over after hearing the gunshots, a sharp-eyed girl in leather racing suit jumped in. She saw my face. She wasn't a Boomer, but I think she was Genom or USSD, or maybe police. Thanks to Jose's explosion, my beautiful body was burned so badly it's unrecognizable. I can't operate in the open anymore. I'll leave the rest to you all."

"That girl in the leather suit… she didn't find out the details of the information Jose gathered, did she?"

"Not unless she's with Genom. But I couldn't recover it from Jose either."

"In that case, it’ll be difficult to infiltrate the base and destroy the machines. The satellite launch starts in two days. It can't be helped; we change the plan. Code name: 'Silent Fanfare'."

"'Silent Fanfare'..."

Chapter 4

The rain that began falling in the evening continued. It was a torrential downpour, like "cats and dogs fighting." Since the latter half of the 20th century, the relentless destruction of nature by humanity had come back to haunt them; "abnormal weather" had simply become the "normal" state of the atmosphere.

Technically, controlling the weather wasn't a difficulty for modern science. The problem was that it had no effect unless done on a global scale, and the cost was enormous compared to the small number of people who would benefit directly. Indeed, the mindset of not spending time or money on things that didn't yield a profit had become more entrenched as technology advanced and the nature of things became clearer through abundant information.

A perfect example was the solar panels gleaming wet like gaudy hats or umbrellas atop every building in Tinsel City. They were various shapes, but all craned their necks toward the south. Each panel generated and stored power solely for its own building. Efficiency had improved so much that it was rarely an issue now, but in the past, the amount of power varied wildly based on location; in extreme cases, a building in the shade would have dim lights. Since the Great Earthquake, public power supply had vanished, and no building could function without its own panels. These panels, reaching for the sky without regard for design or balance, symbolized that egoism and efficiency took priority over everything else in this city.

The colors of neon signs and hologram advertisements, and the flow of car lights—which usually gave a strong impression of the city's heat and restless pulse—faded miserably into a blur the higher one looked. The noise was drowned out by the heavy sound of the rain.

"Hmph. Looking down from here, Tinsel City with its forest of skyscrapers looks like a vast graveyard filled with nothing but tombstones. It's a cold, lonely place..."

The man who muttered this leaned against the wall of an elevator rising vertically from the ground at thirty meters per second. He cast a feverish gaze, like a predator eyeing prey, at the city spreading out before him—a look that contradicted his words.

The man's name was Mason. He was a special secretary to Quincy, the chairman of Genom, a super-conglomerate with immense influence over the political and economic worlds of the West. His specific duties were known only to Quincy, and he was responsible only to Quincy. Within Genom, he had the authority to enter almost any department and was involved in many major decisions. Even executives high enough to know his title only knew him as "the Chairman’s right hand"; they lived in fear because they didn't know his true identity.

Mason's vision gradually blurred. Clinging to the transparent reinforced synthetic resin walls of the elevator wasn't mist, but low-hanging rain clouds. A structure of such height was, of course, the Genom Building in the Sixth District—the "Babel of the 21st Century." Currently, he could barely see the cluster of skyscrapers at the base of the building, which once symbolized the old Shinjuku sub-center. This Genom headquarters, eight years after construction began, was still continuing its ascent toward the heavens.

Mason's destination tonight was, of course, the Chairman's office. The elevator stopped almost imperceptibly. After all, it was an elevator that climbed nearly 1,000 meters in just thirty seconds, with perfect automatic pressure adjustment and shock absorbers.

The moment the heavy doors opened, Mason stepped onto the thick carpet and walked down the wide corridor. It was about forty paces to the massive door in front of him. Only a few people, including Quincy and Mason, could walk this path as naturally as Mason did. Even Quincy's mistress, his secretary of five years, would be stopped at least four times by cold synthetic voice commands. If anyone ignored a check and took even one step forward, they would be—literally—erased from this world.

"Chairman, it’s Mason. Shall I turn on the lights?"

Mason spoke in a quiet voice after entering and closing the door. Only two small indirect lights flickered on the side walls of the spacious room. Behind a giant desk, a silhouette sat with its back turned.

"No, that’s fine. On the day all our broadcasting satellites have successfully finished their launch, I want to be the only one in Tinsel City looking at the beautiful night sky with the naked eye."

Quincy’s voice held not a shred of sentimentality. On the contrary, Mason could tell that Quincy was using his current satisfaction as a stepping stone, his ambitions burning anew for the next target. As expected, Quincy, facing the window where a carpet of clouds spread out under the pale moonlight, turned his back to the fantastic view and began the conversation without hesitation.

"The satellite launch was a success, but that’s just the vessel. The contents are secure, aren't they, Mason? The fate of the Genom conglomerate depends on this."

"Yes. Of the thirty satellites, mutual communication tests have already begun among the twenty launched earlier. Ground stations in remote areas like Tibet, the Andes, and Central Africa have also reported receiving clear FM signals. In just three more days, the first global broadcasting network in human history will be complete, and people will receive a groundbreaking 'gift' that will reach even the most isolated regions. I hear the Swedish National Academy has officially decided to nominate you for this year's Nobel Peace Prize."

Mason reported in an extremely business-like tone, without the slightest hesitation.

"Mason, that's enough jokes and flattery. Such a thing was technically only possible sixty years ago. More importantly, how is the project coming along?"

"We have secured appearances from global top stars and musicians. In the fields of traditional arts and folk music, there are over 400 groups recommended by nations alone, and civilian-level entries are pouring in. We're even broadcasting comments during the satellite tests to invite participation; you might even hear the war cries of headhunting tribes never heard before. Channel lines... seven are prepared, but we've made it possible to use an eighth. Construction at the Jingu Dome venue is proceeding smoothly, and I've had two arrival gates at Narita Spaceport reserved exclusively for musicians and dancers. The chartered shuttle planes—"

"Mason!" Quincy barked, slamming his fist on the table. "I'm not asking about the 'World Folk Music Festival.' I'm asking about the secret project!"

"With all due respect, Chairman, these are all part of a single project. If the satellites don't function as advertised, Genom's technical credibility will drop. Without the festival, our pose of contributing to world peace becomes a sham. Only by bringing the majority of the seven billion people on Earth to Genom's side can the effectiveness of that project..."

"I get it, I get it. In this sense, the music festival must achieve a success far beyond our expectations. But I'll leave that to your skill. Make sure everything goes well."

"Understood. Now, regarding the secret project."

"Hmm—" Quincy leaned forward, elbows on the desk.

"First, regarding the female engineer, Marcia Krasnova, who had gone missing. Her death has been confirmed. It's being treated as an accidental death in a building fire in the Eleventh District five days ago."

"An accidental fire?" Quincy raised his voice. "Don't play dumb. I won't forgive that, even from you."

"No. The AD Police are withholding the information, but the cause of the fire was a Boomer explosion. A handgun found nearby was identified as one of our special-bullet models issued to those involved in the project for anti-Boomer defense."

Mason's expression remained blank.

"What!? You mean the woman was in contact with a Boomer?"

"It appears so. Furthermore, upon examining the parts, we found that while it closely resembled our information-gathering Boomers, a significant portion was independently developed."

"Is there someone who can rival our research and development staff, or…"

"Yes, I've researched the researchers from the start of the Boomer Project. Including those who were in research institutions outside of Genom. However, there are no suspicious individuals or missing persons. It's safe to assume this is a new Boomer created by hands other than Genom's."

"If we can't monopolize the Boomers, the importance of the secret project increases. Mason, are the satellites safe?"

"We performed a meticulous re-check on several satellites before launch, focusing on the areas Marcia Krasnova was responsible for. There were no signs of destruction or tampering. For those already launched, we've only done remote checks, but there should be no problem."

"I see. But if our secret project has been detected by someone, we don't know what they'll do next. Mason, don't overlook even the smallest detail."

"Yes. Actually, there is one thing that has been bothering me."

"What is it?"

"On the same night as the fire where Krasnova died, there was an incident in a habitation zone near the Great Fault in the Third District where a Boomer went on a rampage, destroying a hover-bus and other property. The Boomer itself was one of our products, but the issue is the way it rampaged."

"The way it rampaged?"

"I don't like it. There were several points that deviated from a Boomer's basic behavioral patterns. Yet, the recovered black box showed no signs of tampering or data corruption…"

"Are you saying the Boomer suddenly… went mad? Mason, investigate this thoroughly. No matter what, do not let enemy interference stop the completion of the secret project!"

"Yes!"

As Quincy calmed his excitement and asked, "How is the world below?" Mason answered briefly, "It's all in a terrible rain," and left the Chairman's office.

Leaning against the elevator wall again, he didn't look out the transparent wall this time. He crossed his arms deeply, lost in thought.

(The Chairman seems convinced it's the work of the USSD. Certainly, the USSD would suffer the greatest disadvantage from the secret project. Thinking a current enemy has interfered is logical, and it means he won't neglect his caution… but is that really the case? Assuming the greatest enemy is always responsible is a typical mindset for the head of a giant corporation, but it might just be digging his own grave. What Genom is doing isn't the simple power struggle that Western developed nations engaged in over a hundred years ago. This isn't an era where you can rely on patriotism or loyalty. It's no longer about the happiness of the greatest number. Profit ultimately belongs to the individual. And we are living in an era that is rapidly approaching that 'final moment'…)

Mason's conclusion weighed heavily on his mind.

(In other words, everyone is an enemy. Besides, you never know what kind of motive will start a human being into action…)

At the same time that night, the Knight Sabers—except for Linna—were gathered in the penthouse of a fashion building. Sylia's room had been mostly cleared of the heaps of computer equipment, and with several monitors neatly lined up against the wall, it had regained its previous neat and elegant atmosphere.

The elevator doors opened.

"Now, the feast is ready! It's a masterpiece Sylia and I made with all our skill. Mackie, help me carry it!"

Nene appeared, wearing a floral apron and pushing a heavy-looking wagon. Mackie, his eyes sparkling, rushed over.

"W-wow! Did you make all of this by hand? Man, looks delicious!"

"Hey! You brat, don't you dare sneak a snack. You wait until Linna's show starts!"

Nene slapped Mackie's hand as he tried to lift the edge of the white cloth over the wagon. Nene began arranging the plates of food on the large table in the center of the room. Mackie peered at it with a drooling face.

"Mackie, you go over there. Priss, don't just stand there, help me set the table. All of this was made for you, you know!"

"Yeah, thanks."

But Priss didn't look particularly happy, nor did she stand up to help Nene. Instead, the girl sitting close to her hopped off the sofa and began diligently setting out the knives and forks.

"Oh, how thoughtful of you, Elendira. Come to think of it, this is also a celebration for Elendira, isn't it? I want to hear the broadcast soon."

Sylia, entering while taking off her apron, spoke gently to the hard-working girl. The girl paused for a moment, turned toward Sylia, and nodded with a wide, innocent smile.

(Ah... she really does look like someone.)

Sylia felt that thought again, one that had been appearing in her mind every time she saw Elendira's face lately. She went over to Priss on the sofa and spoke to her in a low voice as she sat down.

"Hey, Priss, I wonder who that girl really is. Since I first met her, I just can't shake the feeling she looks like someone I know."

"Yeah? Like I told you before, when I met her on the hover-bus, I thought she looked like a girl I escaped the orphanage with long ago. But as that feeling of having time-slipped faded, I started noticing more differences. It was just a coincidence. Her age doesn't add up either, no matter how you look at it..."

Despite her dismissive tone, Priss's eyes followed the girl's movements with an unusually gentle light.

(Even though she knows that, she's so open and affectionate... She must feel some kind of kinship with that girl.)

Sylia set aside her question for a moment and thought of Priss's feelings in taking Elendira in and letting her live in her garage home. Elendira, much like Priss had been when she escaped after the Great Earthquake, never revealed her background even to Priss and the others. In today's Tinsel City, where the population of foreigners was so high they could no longer be treated as outsiders and thousands of temporary visitors entered daily, residents were required to carry a residence ID card at all times. Temporary visitors had to carry a visitor card, the modern equivalent of a passport. However, Elendira carried neither.

(There are many illegal immigrants, all with their own circumstances. I'm sure she'll tell us eventually, but it's probably better not to press her now. As for clues to her identity... well, she speaks very clear, fluent Japanese, but she has a habit of rolling her Rs slightly when pronouncing English or loanwords. Latin... maybe she came from Central or South America.)

Just as Sylia was about to speak her thoughts, Priss turned back to a serious topic. Her question wasn't about Elendira, but about the Boomer that caused the fire at the cheap hotel. Sylia, having already finished analyzing the information gathered from the Bee-chip, switched gears to answer.

"As I thought, the Boomer's thought systems were protected by multiple layers of intrusion-prevention blocks, and I couldn't pick up any suspicious data from there. I was able to comprehensively deduce its actions from visual, auditory, and tactile data after the access, but there's nothing particularly suspicious—or rather, given the situation, it didn't go beyond the pillow talk a man and woman share in bed. But just before the woman's attitude suddenly changed, the male Boomer said this..."

Sylia stood up, took a thick file of printouts from the computer console, and showed a page to Priss. Nene and Mackie, having finished setting out the feast, were drawn into the conversation and pulled chairs close to the sofa. Only Elendira went quietly to sit in front of the TV.

"'The World Folk Music Festival'? Hmm, it's certainly not a sexy topic, but Tinsel City is buzzing with it everywhere lately. Doesn't seem particularly strange..."

"But look, Priss, it continues into talk about the broadcasting satellites. There are several lines where the woman seems to dislike the topic, saying 'I'm not in communications...' and then the Boomer asks, 'So, which part of the satellite are you in charge of?' Right after that, the conversation and the woman's gasping are cut off abruptly."

"So, was that information-gathering Boomer some kind of industrial spy for a satellite manufacturer competing with Genom?" Nene asked Sylia, peering at the file. No one noticed that Elendira was listening.

"I thought so too. So, using the fact that the Boomer called the woman 'Marcia' as a lead, I immediately broke into Genom's computer and checked the personnel programs. Among the massive number of Genom employees, there were several women named Marcia, but in the technical field, only one: a Belarussian-German woman named Marcia Krasnova. Her official job was a switchboard check operator."

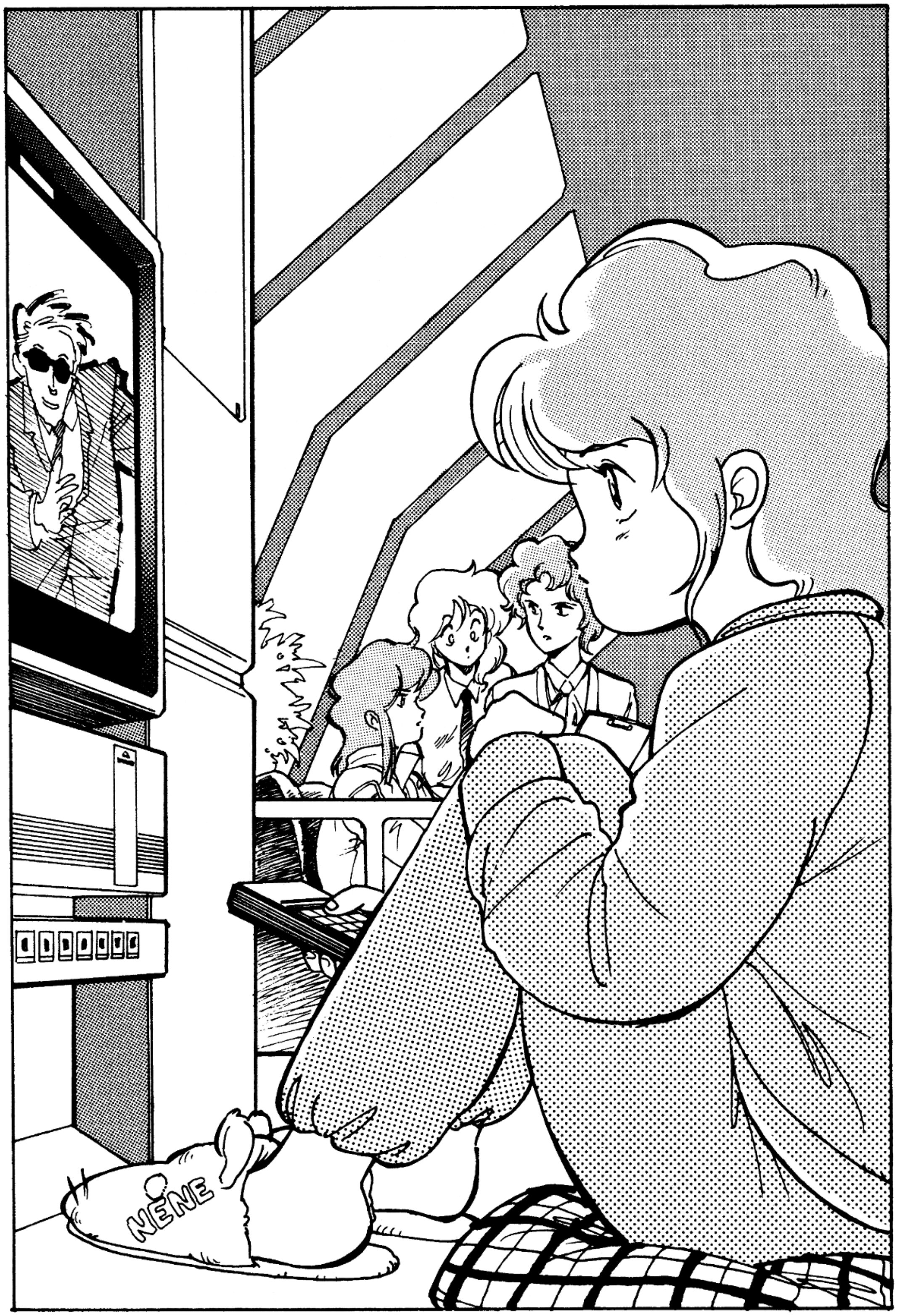
Sylia handed Marcia Krasnova's dossier to Mackie.

"Let's see... Graduated from Kiev Polytechnic University, Department of Optics. Joined Genom four years ago. Transferred to W Division LT-77 Project in February this year... W-wait! LT-77? That's a tank equipped with a terrifying laser cannon that can punch through a fortress wall of 300mm super-steel in 9.6 seconds!"

Mackie, being a mechanic, was well-versed in weaponry and cried out in surprise. At that moment, Elendira's expression changed instantly. She slowly turned down the TV volume and began secretly eavesdropping on their conversation.

"And before that, the SA Division—"

"Mobile weaponry division. Around the time she moved to the weapons division, they finished developing a high-performance raygun capable of firing at 0.7-second intervals, and the project team was disbanded. Do you know what this means?" Sylia looked slowly at everyone’s faces. Mackie, Nene, and even Priss looked stunned.


NENE

"So, that Marcia woman… you mean she's a laser weapons researcher?" Nene asked in a shrill voice.

"Yes. And she must be a top-tier specialist," Sylia said firmly.

"Why would such a dangerous woman be involved in something as peaceful as a broadcasting satellite?" Priss asked casually. "Genom talks a big game about clearing up remote areas and closing the cultural gap, but there's definitely something going on behind the scenes. Maybe that Boomer approached her knowing her true identity… Tsk, even so, that Bee-chip—"

Sylia, who had been speaking, suddenly stopped. She felt like she was being watched from somewhere. She glanced toward Elendira. The TV volume was back to normal, and the girl was laughing at a comedian's old gag.

(No, that can't be it…)

Sylia brushed off the thought and turned back to Nene, who looked puzzled.

"Is something wrong, Sylia?"

"N-no, nothing. Come to think of it, it's almost time for Linna's show. Everyone, please come to the table. Mackie, are you ready for the reception?"

Prompted by Sylia, Priss, Nene, and Elendira gathered around the table. Just then, Nene popped several party crackers in succession, and Mackie pulled a celebratory cracker. A banner saying "Congratulations!" dropped down, and colorful confetti fell right onto Priss's head.

"Yay! Congratulations, Priss!" Nene cheered.

"A toast to Priss and Linna!"

"Oh, thanks. Congratulations to Elendira, too. If it weren't for her, I couldn't have finished that song."

Priss hugged the girl's shoulders and spoke bashfully.

"You're right. Congratulations, Elendira. Now, let's all listen to the music."

Sylia, having removed her apron, spoke kindly to the hard-working girl. Everyone nodded and listened in silence to the performance beginning to flow from the speakers.

The 1:00 AM time signal ended, and a rhythmic beat immediately vibrated the speakers.

"Hi! Nice to meet you, all you healthy young people who can't sleep at night! I'm Linna Yamazaki. Remember the name: L-I-N-N-A. My 'Healthy Midnight' starts tonight. So, as a greeting, here's a song. Headline theme: Queen's 'Epitaph of Youth.' Performed by the queen of street rock, Priss & the Replicants. Let's go!"

Nene, who had expected a driving rock-and-roll song, had been tapping her hands and feet to the instrumental intro, but she stopped still when Priss's whispering vocals and Elendira's accompanying flute began.

Priss held Elendira's hand and lightly closed both eyes. The table vanished, the furniture vanished, the penthouse vanished, and Sylia, Mackie, and Nene were gone. Only one person remained with Priss: Elen—no, Elendira. Priss felt that Elen's memories, long trapped in a painful past, were now completely released, rising to the heavens wrapped in light. And in that part of her heart where Elen's memories had been, she saw Elendira standing and smiling. Before she knew it, Priss was holding Elendira tightly in her arms.

* * *

A street in the pouring rain. Even past midnight, beneath the misty rain, people were still moving and loitering. In the valley of skyscrapers where various lights clashed, the "Fire Bee," an AD Police combat helicopter on patrol, plunged in recklessly, its rotor wind blowing away laundry and potted plants from windowsills as it grazed streetlights. From under a makeshift stall tent crushed by the air pressure, an owner covered in soup finally crawled out and shook a fist at the heli. It was a nightly scene.

A man with a powerful build over two meters tall ducked into one of the laughing stalls. His laborer-like clothes were soaked with rain. But he didn't seem to mind at all.

"Give me those long, slimy things," he ordered bluntly. Droplets fell from his head onto the narrow counter.

"Hey, did you just get to Tinsel City? Even for a day laborer, you're a real rube not to know chicken noodles! Here, wipe your soaking head and your dirty face with this."

The fat, red-faced owner tossed a dirty rag as a joke. It hit the man square in the head and hung there. The man made no move to avoid it. The drunks in the shop burst into laughter.

The man glared at the owner with the eye not covered by the rag and spoke in a low voice. "Turn up the radio..."

"Huh?"

"I said turn up the volume."

The laughter vanished instantly, suppressed by an indescribable pressure.

"W-well, fine. If you don't appreciate a favor, I'm not gonna force you to eat here!"

The owner, blustering to save face, reached for a portable radio covered in grease and turned up the volume with trembling fingers.

The song that could finally be heard clearly was "Epitaph of Youth," played by Linna. The calm singing voice, the sentimental melody, and the flute accompaniment—which for some reason felt nostalgic—drew even the drunken customers to listen in silence. Some even wiped their noses. But the song was quite a mismatch for this giant man who looked like he could crush a stall or two. When the man next to him timidly looked at the giant's face, there wasn't a trace of sentimentality there, only a faint, defiant smile.

"Hey, customer, aren't you gonna eat!?" the owner shouted at the man's back as he started to leave.

"You eat this instead of me."

Without turning around, the man made a motion as if lightly throwing something over his shoulder. But it flew across the counter at incredible speed.

"Mmph!"

The owner caught it in the face and was blown to the back of the shop, crashing loudly into a pile of trash cans. The rag was perfectly stuffed into the owner's large mouth.

Standing back in the rain outside the shop, the giant man ran his hand through his hair to brush away the noodle scraps from the rag. The face of the man who had met the woman disguised as an old man in the Ninth District bar—the night of the hotel explosion—appeared.

"I Finally found you, Elendira. Anyway, things are getting quite interesting... Hahaha."

The man muttered to himself as he walked. He soon vanished into the pouring rain and the crowd.

A few hundred meters west of that habitation zone lay the Sumida River. In an industrial zone slightly further south along the river, a coupe parked in a way that didn't fit the surroundings. The car was a stylish metallic blue, but most nearby streetlights were broken, so no light reached to illuminate it. The factories had long since closed for the day, and the green glow of small emergency lights was only faintly visible far beyond the barbed-wire fences. The brightest light was the reflection of the entertainment district across the river on the water.

The man and woman in the coupe knew another car had followed them. The man was sneering, thinking, "Do they want to watch us having fun that badly?"

But the woman had known who the tracker was for some time, and she even picked up the sounds and mutters from the car fifty meters away.

The man in the coupe suddenly turned on the room light.

"H-hey, what are you doing? People will see!" the woman cried. Her dress strap had been removed, and her full white breasts were clearly visible in the light. The man's hand caressed them as if lifting them.

"Oh, you noticed the car behind us too? It's fine; it's this far away and pouring rain. They can't see anything, Jane."

"Well, then..."

The woman named Jane spoke with a sweet, breathy sigh. She knew the tracker could see clearly into the car even through this rain and was picking up this exchange. Because the tracker was a Boomer. And probably a Genom Boomer...

"I'll give whoever wants to see a show," the man laughed pleasantly. "That's my style."

"You're a sadist, aren't you? That person over there is gonna explode from frustration."

The woman also chuckled.

"Then let's do it even more flashily so they can see!"

The man whispered in her ear and roughly pushed up the edge of her skirt, sliding his hand in.

Jane calculated quickly that her swaying breasts must be clearly visible as she cried out and leaned back against the seat. As expected, the tracker reported the following to someone:

"She seems to be just a light-headed woman. She approached him knowing he's the sub-producer of the Genom-sponsored music festival. She was persistently asking him to hire her as a bunny girl venue guide. What should I do? Can I pull back?"

(I want you to... go quickly!) Jane's lips, painted with garish lipstick, trembled as she mimicked moans of pleasure to deceive him, but she was frantic.

That woman was, of course, one of the Boomers who had infiltrated under the wreckage of the floating city. She had been informed about her companion who had her identity discovered by a Genom female engineer and was shot in the head and killed in an explosion. Getting the desired information while making the target drunk with pleasure required bold physical skill and subtle conversational techniques.

But in this case, it wasn't just that. The music festival producer had a Boomer guard attached to him without his knowledge. There weren't many chances to catch a producer chased by a minute-by-minute schedule. The World Folk Music Festival starts in a week. If she missed this opportunity, the plan from her line would be ruined.

"What's wrong? You don't seem very into it."

The producer, who had preyed on many young singers and talents, was sensitive to the woman's reactions. When factors outside the programmed patterns entered, even an excellent information-gathering Boomer could easily show hesitation on the surface, just like a human.

Just then, the engine of the car behind them started. Then the screech of tires as it made a U-turn...

"I guess I'll turn off the light. I'll play some music instead—"

The room light went off, and a slow ballad began to flow from the car stereo. Hearing it, the female Boomer froze.

(T-this flute... Elendira!!) Jane snapped her head toward the rear window. The car that was about to U-turn on the riverbank was approaching at high speed in reverse.

(Damn, they were still eavesdropping!!) The woman instantly ducked under the seat. At that moment, a heavy impact hit. *Crack!* The man's body on top of her flew over the seat and slammed head-first into the rear window. A dull sound of the man's neck breaking was heard.

Jane ignored him, kicked open the door—now wrinkled like paper—and jumped out. But a Boomer was already standing in her way. The car stereo was still playing the same song. The Boomer's eyes, looking down at the disheveled Jane, took on an even more maniacal glow of madness.

"Tsk!"

The female Boomer, who was no match for a combat Boomer in terms of high-density power, fell to the ground as if landing on her buttocks. The combat Boomer lunged at her. Jane knelt and thrust her right hand straight toward the Boomer. In her palm, stretched to its limit, a black cavity appeared.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Her palm spat fire repeatedly. It was a machine gun built into her forearm. Taken by surprise, the Boomer recoiled. Bullets exploded into its defenseless face.

"Damn, is this it!?"

The woman glared hatefully at the Boomer and gritted her teeth. The high-density bio-synthetic skin shattered and flew off in pieces, revealing a black iron head gleaming in the rain. The body, losing its balance, fell heavily onto the laminate asphalt with a thud, landing on its back.

"Hmph, serves you right, you Genom puppet. Even an information-gathering Boomer has this much weaponry!"

The female Boomer stood up with a triumphant smile and approached the Boomer to deliver the finishing blow. She brought her charred palm, blackened from her own bullets, over the Boomer's half-open mouth.

But then, the Boomer's closed eyes snapped open. The female Boomer tried to jump back in panic. Faster than her movement, the combat Boomer's hand, armored in ultra-high-density Apotex, grabbed her slender ankle with a crunch.

Two sharp blades sprang out from its chest with incredible force, piercing through Jane's soft breasts. The woman's scream echoed through the deserted industrial zone.

In the next moment, the combat Boomer opened its own chest and suddenly fired a thermal cannon.

The female Boomer, hit by the thermal cannon at point-blank range, clutched her scorched chest and began to writhe like she was losing her mind.

"GRRRRRAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

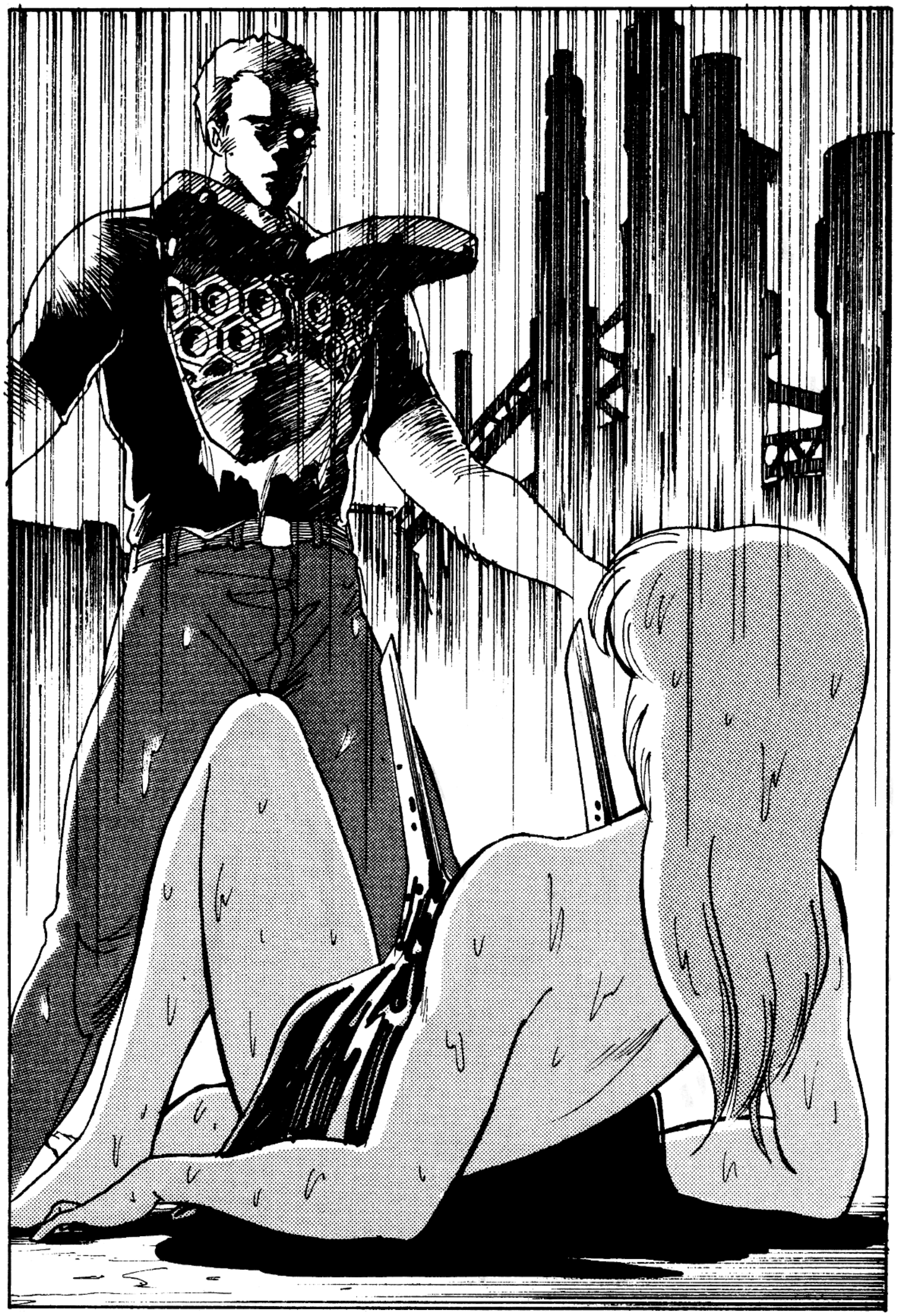
Looking down at her, the Boomer let out a blood-chilling roar. Within seconds, before the female Boomer stopped moving, the combat Boomer ran at high speed down the riverbank road, leaped across Canal Street in just a few steps, and lunged onto the streets of a habitation zone where people were still passing by even late at night.

"E-excuse me, a Boomer!?"

Linna's voice, as she was about to introduce the second song, suddenly became shrill. The noise of a falling chair or microphone was heard through the penthouse speakers.

"What!?" Priss kicked her chair and stood up. "Mackie!"

Mackie rushed to the radio console. Linna's voice, bordering on a scream, was coming from the speakers.



"E-everyone, a Boomer is coming here… no, toward you, no, that's not it, anyway, it's rampaging really close by! L-let's stay calm, please stay calm. I mean, no matter how much of a Boomer it is, it can't attack everyone at once! Y-yes, we'll definitely be saved. Everyone will be saved. Oh, but maybe you guys won't be saved, but mostly we should be saved… someone will be saved… surely. Probably… maybe. Hey, I'm gonna be saved, right? Help me, everyone!!"

Chapter 5

"Is Linna gonna get it!?" Nene jumped onto her chair and screamed.

"Of course not. Knight Sabers, emergency deployment!"

Sylia's clear, commanding voice rang through the tense atmosphere of the penthouse.

Minutes later, Sylia, Nene, and Priss were in the rear compartment of a command carrier disguised as a lingerie shop delivery van. Through a small window in the wall, the city lights flowed past like stop-motion footage.

"What about that girl?"

Sylia, now in her underwear, asked Priss as she quickly donned her battle lingerie.

"You mean Elendira? I told her to wait quietly in the penthouse until we get back. Why?"

Sylia silenced Nene with a "Shh!"

"The Boomer appeared in the Fourth District, Second Habitation Zone along the Sumida River. It's definitely near Linna's FM station, but the Boomer is still on the street. And it seems to be engaging in indiscriminate destruction..."

Mackie, tracing a map on a transparent resin board, pinpointed the location from intercepted police radio.

"It's just like when Elendira and I were attacked," Priss said as she prepared to pull her neck-guard over her head after putting on her leotard-like battle lingerie.

"If that's the case, it's fine, but... Hey, Priss. I'm a little concerned about that girl."

"We couldn't bring her along. Didn't you decide that our secret shouldn't be known to anyone, no matter who they are?"

Priss asked curiously as she tucked her long hair into the neck-guard. Once finished, she joined the body and neck parts of the suit at the four triangular chips on her chest and back. The entire inner suit acted as a sensor, picking up minute electrical signals from body movements and transmitting them to the hard suit. This system allowed the 70–80kg hard suit to move naturally and freely.

"No, it's not that. I just can't help feeling that she might have something to do with this Boomer incident."

"She was on the hover-bus that was attacked, sure. But she was with us tonight. How could she have driven a distant Boomer mad?" Nene cut in from the side. She was already fully dressed in her hard suit, carrying her helmet.

"That's true, but... when I think about the Boomer, her face just pops into my mind. I hope I'm just overthinking it."

"Got it. I want to know about Elendira too, so I'll ask her again when we get back. But first, we gotta deal with that rampaging Boomer."

"Yes. Mackie, how much longer?" Sylia pressed the intercom button to ask Mackie in the driver's seat.

"Almost there! I can see the AD Police's patrol lights!"

"Wait, the Bee-chip... But we don't have to do experiments in an emergency like this."

"It's always an emergency when a Boomer rampages. This time, Linna just happens to be in danger," Sylia said in her usual calm tone. But precisely because everyone else was agitated, her attitude carried an even greater sense of impending crisis. "This isn't just about a job. To solve the mystery of why Boomers are going mad, we have to use this Bee-chip. The formation we use is designed for normal Boomer patterns, just like the AD Police Boomer Hunter teams. To effectively counter a maddened Boomer, we need information from its perceptions."

"I-I see. So, what's the plan, Sylia?"

"We have to see the Boomer with our own eyes first... and then look for a chance to try this new Bee-chip with the transmitter."

As she spoke, Sylia carefully tucked the Bee-chip into a pocket inside her hard suit. "Let's go, Nene!"

"Alright!"

Two Moto-slaves sped down the super-expressway alongside the command carrier.

"Tsk, again? These Boomer bastards have really been something lately. Well, a Boomer's existence is abnormal in the first place, but that movement… it's beyond mad."

Leon McNichol, leader of the AD Police patrol team, jumped out of his parked Roadchaser. The destruction and slaughter by the Boomer occurring two blocks away was identical to the hover-bus attack that happened in another habitation zone a few days prior. It was a seemingly aimless rampage, hitting everything in sight.

The counterattacks against the armed officers were also far from the meticulous strategies seen in usual Boomer crimes. It would fire an ineffective laser at a thick-armored transport vehicle, then suddenly target a single officer hiding behind a crushed stall, using full thermal cannons from its chest and both arms to incinerate the stall and the officer together.

"How am I supposed to give orders…" Leon gritted his teeth, clutching his railgun.

Just then, a portable heli carrier truck parked diagonally across the road began to wobble without warning.

"The Boomer broke through the second formation! It's coming your way!"

A scream from an armed officer came over the radio. Searchlights swung toward Leon. In the blinding light, a powerful silhouette stood atop the truck roof. A bullet from a Gerlich rifle fired from the other side of the truck hit the Boomer.

"GRAAAAAAHHH!"

The Boomer roared. Leon ducked as bullets whizzed over his head. *Crash, crash, crash!* Leon turned to see the windows of his Roadchaser shattered.

"You idiots! Stop letting the Boomer play you. Don't shoot your own guys!" Leon shouted.

But in the middle of a gunfight loud enough to burst eardrums, there was no guarantee they heard him. And even if they did, they were panicked by the unexpected reaction and were only focused on killing the Boomer. Forgetting the ironclad rule of urban combat not to endanger civilians, they were firing wildly at the Boomer that had broken the encirclement.

The Boomer jumped down from the truck. It slid its thick arms under the body of the truck and began to lift it with all its might.

"What's the point of flipping that? It's really lost its head."

Leon, hiding behind the Roadchaser to avoid friendly fire, aimed his railgun at the Boomer's head and pulled the trigger. *Zap.* A flash erupted from the back of the Boomer's head as it tried to lift the truck.

"Got it!"

The Boomer let go of the truck and rolled around, clutching its head. Simultaneously, the engine of the truck slammed into the ground and spat orange flames.

"Run! The truck's gonna blow!" Leon shouted as he pressed himself against the Roadchaser.

A roar. A flash. A shockwave. For a moment, he couldn't even open his eyes in the carnage.

"Is... is the Boomer—!"

When Leon looked up, black smoke from the burning truck filled the road. Through the smoke, an armed officer in a full mask ran up.

"Captain!"

"You idiots! You almost got me! Where's the Boomer!?"

"Well..."

"Don't tell me you lost it!"

"But you were the closest one, Captain—"

"D-don't make excuses. Find it. You can destroy cars or obstacles. I'll fudge the report. Just take it down before it hurts any people!" Leon fired off orders.

(Damn, it's been a long time since I've been this panicked. I have to find it fast before it gets to... Linna?)

A light engine hum echoed from behind, and as Leon turned—

A single motorcycle charged forward. "The Boomers jumped into that building!" Priss yelled toward Leon like a parting shot as the bike raced past his Road Chaser, plunging into one of the roadside buildings without even slowing down.

"Was that... the Knight Sabers?! Trying to outsmart us again, are they?"

An armed officer restrained Leon as he attempted to dash toward the building after the bike. "If they've fled into the building, we have no choice but to initiate Operation E. Your orders, sir—"

"Emergency Operation?! In the middle of a city teeming with people, you're saying we evacuate every resident in just five minutes and then demolish the building!?"

"B-but sir, if we don't, the damage will only continue to spread!"

Leon bit his lip in a mix of rage and frustration.

(What is going on with the Boomers tonight? Once they cast off their synthetic skin and enter battle style, they lose their ability to perform fine movements. Unless they've pre-programmed the building's structural data, entering a building should be a disadvantage for them. Besides, this is combat. To flee into a labyrinthine multi-tenant building...)

"Fine, activate Operation E. However, hold the demolition for ten minutes. In the meantime, cooperate with the rescue squads to evacuate the residents from the buildings on both sides and the rear!"

"Yes, sir! But there are residents inside that building as well..."

"I'll break in and flush the Boomer out. I won't let it lay a single finger on a human. Use the speakers to tell the residents to escape through the windows!"

Having finished relaying his orders, Leon chased after the motorcycle that had dived in first, running with a desperate expression toward the fifty-story multi-tenant building.

Priss, who had surged into the building along with her Moto Slave, nearly struck the panicked residents as they fled. She hurriedly performed a spin-turn and came to a halt.

"Where is the Boomer?" she demanded threateningly, grabbing the neck of a man who was staggering toward the exit.

"It's... it's heading for the upper floors..." The man pointed to the hall beyond the entrance. A cylindrical atrium was cut through the center of the building all the way to the top floor, with a spiral emergency staircase tracing the wall. The Boomer had undoubtedly climbed up there.

Keeping her horn blaring to part the wave of people surging toward the entrance, Priss charged into the hall.

A spiral walkway shaped like a slope within a circular atrium—it might have been a stylish structure two decades ago, but this was a dilapidated building long past its service life. Aside from some suspicious late-night shops occupying the basement and the first few floors, it was a multi-tenant building of unknown purpose.

Catching the echo of footsteps that sounded like a Boomer, Priss looked up the spiral stairs. In the middle of the atrium floated a holographic advertising tower, its focus largely blurred.

"'KK Media Station Building!' Tsk, of all places, the AD Police cornered the Boomer in a hell of a spot. Isn't this the building where Linna's broadcasting station is?"

The two elevators beside the hall were operating at full capacity. The moment the doors opened, the packed crowd was vomited out, scattering in panic throughout the hall. At that moment, directly in front of Priss's Moto Slave...

Splat.

A sickening sound rang out, and blood splattered across several square meters. A split second later, a pistol tumbled beside the corpse with a dry thud. Linna was not among those who had poured out of the elevator.

The people exiting the elevator quickly scattered toward the circular walls, fearfully peering up into the atrium. About twenty stories up, a black metallic object could be seen moving.

(The Boomer!)

Priss immediately floored the accelerator. Using her left foot as a pivot, she whipped the Moto Slave around to face the spiral walkway. She intended to race up the path all at once with full power.

"Whoa, mind giving me a lift while you're at it?"

Just as a familiar voice sounded in Priss's ear, the sensation of someone clinging to her back transmitted through her Hard Suit.

"I'm Leon of the AD Police. If I get left behind, you'll just knock it down and run anyway, won't you?"

An ID card was thrust over Priss's shoulder. The photo on the 3D hologram was the face of the groupie-like man who was always chasing her around. This was also the man who had saved Priss and Elendira from a Boomer after their narrow escape from the Hover Bus.

"Identity check! Even if you have confidence in your skills, you can't refuse police cooperation, right? Right, Knight Saber lady?"

From the sixth floor up, for safety, the guards that had been railings on the lower floors extended to the ceiling, with steel reinforcements planted at twenty-centimeter intervals. To Priss, racing past them at high speed, the reinforcements appeared as nothing more than a faint blur due to the intense pace. It felt like climbing a sheer cliff tens of meters above the ground, balanced on a slight protrusion. Furthermore, it was a high-speed circular motion. An ordinary human would have likely lost their sense of balance and tumbled dizzily into the atrium. If Priss made even the slightest error in steering, she would easily smash through the protective bars and fly out into the void.

Priss was still wearing her Hard Suit, and the gyro sensors in the rear of her helmet prevented her from losing her equilibrium. However, Leon was bare-bodied, taking the full force of the wind pressure…

"What a god-awful building. So far, there's no sign of the Boomer going wild in the passages we've passed, but everything's a mess! They're all rooms that haven't seen a soul in a while, even if vagrants or illegal immigrants were using them as dens!" Leon shouted into Priss's ear.

(Hmph.)

Leon had no way of knowing that this woman in the Knight Sabers' Hard Suit was the same person as Priss, the rock singer.

"Don't blame me if you get thrown off!"

"Of course! Go ahead and floor it, no holding back!"

The Moto Slave left an explosion of sound in its wake as it raced up the walkway slope. Priss felt a sudden sense of admiration. Normally, it should have been difficult even to keep one's eyes open, yet Leon was properly observing the state of each floor and making sharp judgments.

(This guy… he looks as frivolous as they come, but his bravado isn't just talk.)

It was just as Priss whispered this to herself.

"There's the Boomer!" Leon shouted, firing toward a walkway several floors above.

However, the railgun bullets struck the ceiling wall of the walkway and burst, merely opening a hole about twenty centimeters in diameter. Scattered pieces of imitation concrete wall fell into the atrium.

"Geez, did you even aim? You just broke the path we're supposed to take, damn it!"

Her admiration was short-lived; Priss was already hurling insults at Leon.

"I won't miss next time. I've confirmed the passage the Boomer ducked into. Seven more to go!"

Sylia looked up at the cylindrical building that towered high over the street. Nene's anxious voice came through the helmet's speaker.

"Mackie, is there no way to contact Linna?" Sylia asked urgently.

"Ah, something's coming through the police radio… Operation E, resident evacuation, demolition! This is bad, Sis! The AD Police have resorted to emergency measures. They're saying they're going to crush the building along with the Boomer. There's only six minutes left!"

Sylia and Nene's Moto Slaves were just entering the Habitation Zone from ultra-high speeds. Inside that building, the Boomer was running rampant...

"Mackie, hurry and contact Linna. Tell her to get out of there this instant!"

"I've got her!"

"What about Linna? What happened to her?"

"No need to contact her. Linna is safe for now."

"What?"

"I mean, Linna is still yelling into the broadcast microphone like always. It seems she doesn't know the Boomer is nearby. She's broadcasting with gusto, saying, 'I'm a DJ putting my life on the line! I won't let a little thing like a Boomer get me down!' I wonder what she'll do when she realizes the situation she's in?"

"What—the Boomer broke into the building Linna's in!?" Sylia asked back reflexively.

Mackie, who was intercepting the police radio from the Command Carrie, relayed the news.

"This is no time for casual talk!" Nene snapped at Mackie.

Sylia and Nene sped their Moto Slaves toward the building from the backstreets, but before they could go far, they hit the AD Police's emergency cordons. Passage-blocking boards marked "DANGER! NO ENTRY" were set up, with several armed officers standing guard.

"Stop! You can't go past here!" an officer shouted upon seeing the Moto Slaves charge.

The officers sensed they intended to ignore the command, and tension immediately rippled through them as they raised their rifles.

"Nene, we're breaking through!" Sylia shouted.

"Moto Slave mode, standby—" Sylia's instruction flew.

"Standby, okay!"

The distance closed until they could see the twitching expressions of the officers as their eyes widened with surprise and terror.

"Whoa, they're gonna ram us!"

"Fire, fire!"

The officers shouted and raised their muzzles in unison.

"Change!"

Sylia's shout and the arrival of the bullets happened almost simultaneously. As if jumping over a rain of bullets, the two bikes soared into the air.

Clang!

The moment everyone thought they were going to collide, the silhouettes of the bikes changed drastically.

"A-aerial disassembly—!?" every officer thought for a split second.

Far above the passage-blocking boards, the two bikes performed a full rotation! Or so it seemed. In reality, it was not so. Only the bikes rotated; the two riders flew through the air while maintaining their leaping posture. The bikes, which had moved behind the riders, split open down the middle and merged with the riders as if covering them! It was like a birdman.

The wheels extended to the left and right like wings. Though they didn't flap, they caught the air and allowed the two riders to glide softly. Just as it looked like they would soar over the cordons and descend to the ground, they kicked off the earth with a powerful jet burst and ascended in an instant.

"W-what on earth was that!?"

By the time the armed officers looked at each other with bewilderment, the two strange shadows had already vanished onto the roof of one of the buildings behind them.

"Found you at last!"

Almost before he finished shouting, Leon kicked off the bike's tank and dove into the passage.

"Idiot, don't rush!"

Rolling her Moto Slave onto the walkway, Priss followed after.

Leon's back disappeared. From the atrium that pierced the center of the building vertically, passages radiated in three directions. It was just as Priss reached the corner. Heavy gunfire erupted in the passage.

"Leon!"

The one who answered that call was not Leon, but the Boomer's laser cannon.

Priss instantly rolled forward on the walkway, narrowly dodging the laser. What caught the edge of her eye was Leon crawling on the floor and the Boomer standing in the depths of the passage, its mouth gapping open as it prepared to spit another laser.

"Nice one. Alright, I'll deliver the finishing blow!"

Leon strode toward the Boomer with gusto.

"Don't get cocky!"

Priss immediately flipped back to hide in the corner and peered into the passage. To restrain Leon, Priss stepped forward. Leon lifted his hips and fired his railgun. However, the Boomer nimbly ducked its head to dodge the bullet and opened its mouth wide once more.

"Move!"

The Boomer's throat made a sickening sound. As if pushed out by that sound, a pointed mass fell onto the floor from the Boomer's mouth along with a small amount of liquid. It was the hard needle that should have hit! The Boomer stood up as if nothing had happened and opened its mouth wide again.

Priss shouted at Leon and faced the Boomer head-on. The sensors embedded in the Boomer's eyeballs caught Priss as a new target and moved busily.

Seizing that moment, Priss fired the railgun equipped on her right arm. The first shot hit the Boomer's forehead but was deflected by the thick armor.

"Tsk."

Unlike the oversized railgun Leon carried, the one built into Priss's Hard Suit attachment was less powerful, but there were three units capable of rapid fire. The second shot missed, but the third hard needle hit the Boomer's large mouth perfectly.

The Boomer clutched its throat, bending its body in agony like a human who had swallowed a foreign object, and began coughing violently.

However, after firing its laser cannon once, the Boomer spun around and dashed toward the back of the passage.

"The Boomer bastard is definitely crazy. It turned tail and ran even though it was in a completely advantageous position."

(The Boomer's reactions are certainly full of strange things. But because of that, the AD Police's anti-Boomer formation has been broken, and even we're being jerked around... If it were a Boomer acting as a tool for human desire, there would at least be a way to deal with it, but this is like a bloodthirsty beast—no, even a beast becomes quiet once it's full. It's a weapon, an automatic doll of destruction dancing only for the pleasure of ruin and the sight of blood!)

Priss felt a chill run down her spine as she realized anew the horror of a crazed Boomer. Leon dashed after the Boomer without hesitation. Priss, snapped back to her senses, hurried down the passage to catch up with his back.

One of the characteristics of the C-series combat Boomers was a material fusion function called the "Fusion Function." From the tips of thick tentacle-like tissues—the equivalent of human muscles—it would erupt special liquids and high heat, allowing the tentacles to penetrate any inorganic material and assimilate it into part of its body. This was also possible for the Boomer's own internal systems; in this case, it could push out objects like bullets while repairing its body tissue through fusion. It was a terrifying self-repair function.

The passage soon reached a dead end. From there, the passages extending left and right both curved gently, and one could only see as far as the third door ahead. Like the spiral walkway surrounding the atrium walls, it seemed to be a corridor circling the inside of the building. There was no sign of the Boomer in either direction.

"The elevators aren't working anymore. Most of the people in the building have evacuated. That means the thing is hiding somewhere on this floor," Leon said, checking the elevator display at the end of the passage.

"Wait... damn it, there's only four minutes left!"

"What's wrong?"

"Operation E—the operation to blow up this entire building along with the Boomer is underway. If we've cornered the Boomer this far, there's no way it can escape. If we dawdle, we'll go down with the bastard. It's a shame I couldn't finish it with my own hands, but it can't be helped. Let's get out of here!"

Leon clicked his tongue and pressed the elevator switch.

"Can the AD Police only come up with such sloppy operations? What if someone's still inside the building by any chance!?"

"But look, if that Boomer keeps going wild, the damage will be far worse than this!"

"Enough. I'll find and defeat the Boomer myself. You're the leader, aren't you? Go back down immediately and stop the operation!"

Saying this, Priss began walking briskly toward the right side of the corridor.

"D-dammit... H-hey, wait! Once the countdown drops below five minutes, it's impossible to stop the operation!"

It was just as Leon raised his voice to stop Priss.

KYAAAHHH!!!!

Clearly, a woman's scream was heard, muffled but echoing through the supposedly empty building. Leon and Priss simultaneously dashed off, splitting left and right down the corridor.

"Of course, everyone's long since used to Boomer commotions! You think I'd be scared of a Boomer and quit? Well, I might have lost my cool for a tiny bit earlier, but I'm full of energy now. Dancing while watching a Boomer go wild is kind of refined, don't you think? It looks like I've talked a bit too long, so let's get to the next song—Huh?"

Linna, who had been frantically talking into the microphone, turned around to find the mixing room empty.

(W-what happened? Don't tell me… the owner and the mixer heard about the Boomer and got scared and ran away…)

She looked and saw that no discs were playing. At this rate, no music would flow no matter how much she operated the controls.

(This makes me so mad! Where did everyone go!)

Linna threw open the door to the corridor side and peered left and right.

(How strange…)

Earlier, there were figures wandering around, and the room two doors down was an all-night mahjong center where the noise had been audible through the walls, but now it was deathly silent. She was about to step out the door, somewhat uneasy, when suddenly, heavy footsteps approached.

(A-A Boomer?)

"Isn't that Linna?"

The shadow at the doorway shouted. A Knight Sabers Hard Suit! And since the owner of the navy blue Hard Suit was…

"Priss, help me!"

As Linna shouted that as if clinging to the microphone, a giant black hand reached in from the side, snatched the microphone, and crushed it like paper.

Finally, at the limit of her endurance, a piercing scream burst from Linna's mouth.

"Damn it! There were still people left!"

Leon, who had come around the corridor from the opposite direction, saw Linna and turned pale. Perceiving Leon's hesitation, the Boomer holding Linna dashed right past Leon's eyes and ran down the corridor. Leon had once steeled himself that some sacrifices were unavoidable, but he could not overlook a young girl being carried away right before him. He couldn't care less that the countdown was ticking toward zero.

"Wait, Boomer!"

"Idiot! You're in danger too. Get out of here now!"

Priss and Leon shouted at each other as they dashed alongside. There was no sign of the Boomer on the walkway beyond the curve. Priss let out a gasp. She saw the Boomer up ahead turn the corner by the elevator toward the spiral walkway.

"I'm not kidding. If I abandon them and run, the name of the AD Police will cry!"

Leon declared with death-defying resolve.

(What an old-fashioned guy! Fine...)

Priss quickly moved in front of Leon and delivered a punch to his stomach. She only tapped him lightly, but for someone like Leon who had just barely escaped from the Hover Bus, it was enough. Leon tumbled onto the corridor, unable to help himself. Fortunately, the elevator had been called to this floor earlier. Priss dragged Leon's body and shoved it into the elevator box. Before Leon, whose face was distorted in pain, the elevator mechanically closed its doors. The sensation of floating as the box descended at high speed only intensified Leon's sense of regret.

Chapter 6

Reaching the walkway, Priss realized there was no sign of the Boomer anywhere.

(Don't tell me...)

The place where the laser the Boomer had fired at Priss and the others earlier was now a twisted mess. Priss stuck her head out from the gap in the steel reinforcements and peered down into the dizzying abyss of the atrium. But, about thirty-some meters above Priss's head, in this fifty-story building...

Just a few meters short of the reinforced synthetic resin glass tower that hovered like an umbrella at the summit, a black mass was slithering up the steel reinforcements planted along the walkway near the top floor like a monkey. The Boomer must have exited into the atrium from the gap in the reinforcements where Priss was now poking her head. And, like someone possessed by an uncontrollable passion, it climbed higher and higher through the deep, artificial vertical hole. Above its summit, ominous rain clouds could be seen swirling violently. For some reason, the sight of the Boomer made Priss's wild blood boil.

There was the anxiety of the looming time limit for the building's demolition. There was also the sense of duty to save Linna, with whom she had navigated many life-and-death situations as Knight Sabers. But what drove Priss most strongly was an inexpressible passion, like a primitive hunter chasing a beast. After all, the Hard Suit amplifies the wearer's muscle power nine to ten times...

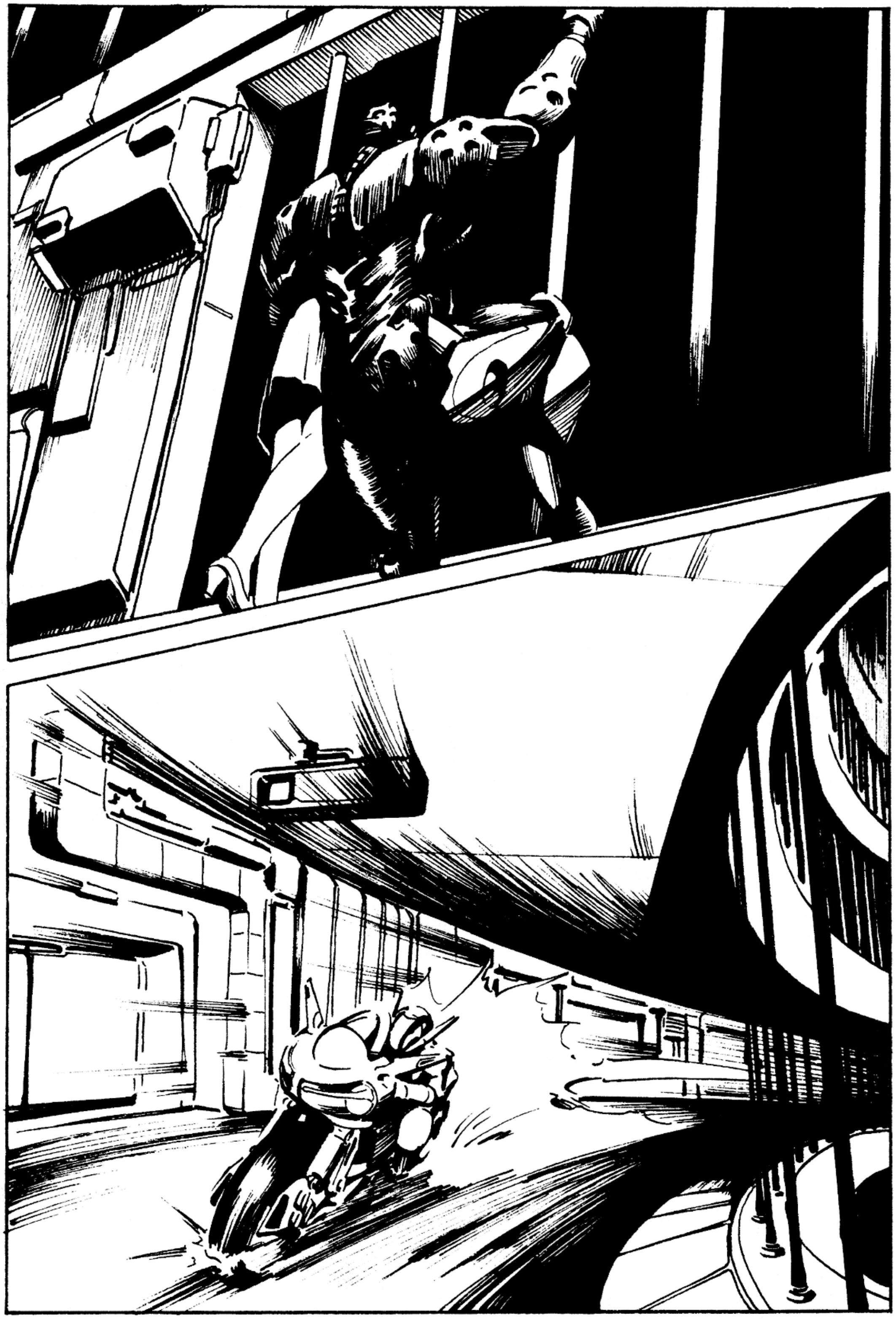
"Ah, um, a guest has just dropped in unexpectedly. And he's very, very sturdy."

The equipment filled into the room melted and collapsed like candy, and the doorway expanded to three times its size.

There was an elevator and a walkway. Using them would certainly reach the top floor much faster than climbing through the atrium. That was logical. But the Boomer climbed the walls as if deliberately avoiding the easy path. If asked why, Priss felt she could answer proudly on the Boomer's behalf: *Look, isn't the sky clearly visible above? Isn't there a massive, unobstructed path right here?*

Despite having a human form, it was several levels more cunning, precise, meticulous, and powerful than a human. Priss had always considered such Boomers as detestable, hateful, and loathsome beings. But this Boomer—crazed as it might be—was not the usual Boomer that seemed to outwit and mock humans. It was surrendering itself to the impulse surging from within, rampaging as much as it pleased, desperately fleeing while being pursued, and finally climbing toward the only remaining exit.

Was that it? But that is too similar to the extreme states found in living things, animals, and humans. Had something common to both Boomers and humans finally emerged in that extreme state? To modern people whose lives and thoughts are fully steeped in civilization, who have forgotten their wildness and long ago given up on dreaming, it is impossible to understand Priss's feelings at that moment. Priss finally recognized the Boomer as an opponent to be confronted head-on. She was convinced that defeating this Boomer was the only way to prove herself.



"Damn it. Just you wait, Boomer!"

Spitting those words toward the climbing Boomer, Priss dashed over to where her Moto Slave was lying on the walkway. She threw open the throttle to gain speed—a move that could only be described as reckless in such a narrow, curved path. On the smooth floor, the rear wheel slid side-to-side. She wrestled with the handle, her Hard Suit scraping the wall and sending sparks flying. If she got caught on the steel reinforcements, she would be slammed onto the floor, or worse, thrown into the atrium, falling a hundred meters straight down to the hall.

It was a do-or-die gamble. But Priss handled the Moto Slave skillfully amidst a sense of fulfillment that felt like her entire body was burning. The sense of danger and fear seemed to vanish into the surroundings that flew past at high speed.

Shatter!

(Hmm—?)

It seemed the Boomer had finally reached the top floor and smashed the reinforced synthetic resin glass. The glass, shattered into pieces, fell through the atrium, glittering as it went—a sight caught in the corner of Priss's eye. At the same time, a sudden gust of wind blew down from above.

"Whoa, is that all from the boomer!?"

Priss gritted her teeth and corrected her unsteady posture. Soon, the emergency exit to the roof came into view. She blew off the lock with her railgun and rode the Moto Slave onto the roof. The sensation of braking felt strangely nostalgic because she hadn't used the brakes once on her way up.

It was in the middle of driving rain. The red warning lamps mounted on the four corners of the building and the top of the tower were hazy, and the world below was almost invisible. Low-hanging rain clouds enveloped the top of the building.

Priss turned on the infrared sensors in her helmet's visor, and once her eyes finally adjusted to the heavy rain, she saw something moving about ten meters beyond the Moto Slave. The fluttering white things were Linna's legs. As before, the Boomer was holding Linna in its arms. But despite her charging out on a Moto Slave, the Boomer remained with its back turned.

(What, is there something in front?)

Straining her eyes, about another ten meters beyond the Boomer, at the corner of the building, there was something like a human figure...

At that moment, the heat-ray cannon in the Boomer's chest spat fire. Several searing beams pierced the security barbed wire that circled the roof.

In an instant, the figure of a person who had nimbly dodged and jumped appeared within the flames that burned out.

"Sylia—!"

"You're a lifesaver. I was in a bind with Linna caught by the Boomer!"

Priss called out to Sylia through the communicator built into her helmet, and at the same moment, fired her railgun toward the Boomer's feet. This was to draw the Boomer's attention away from Sylia. As expected, the Boomer turned toward her and radiated a laser from its throat. Priss immediately started the Moto Slave and dove behind the glass tower.

"Priss, more importantly, if we don't get away from this building soon, it's going to be a disaster!"

Sylia, who had secured an advantageous position thanks to Priss's cover, responded. To confuse the Boomer, Sylia irradiated a laser from her palm onto the floor next to the Boomer. The steel plate burned, and a violent steam rose.

"Are you talking about the AD Police's Operation E? I know. We've got almost no time left!"

Priss fired the railgun again.

"To be precise, forty-two seconds left."

The Boomer, distracted by Priss on her bike and Sylia dancing like a butterfly in Moto Slave mode, stood stalled while still holding Linna. It couldn't even manage a decent attack.

"It's impossible to defeat the Boomer with just that. Besides, I can't do a thing while Linna's caught," Priss voiced her frustration.

"I have a plan. Priss, draw the Boomer toward you for a bit. When I give the signal, back off to the south side of the roof—"

"Got it. At this rate, I'm prepared to go down with it. I won't let Linna die alone!"

Priss deliberately roared her engine and raced past the Boomer's nose, firing her railgun showily to provoke it. The Boomer took Priss's bait. While firing lasers wildly, it gradually approached the south wall. Shaken by the Boomer, Linna screamed.

"KYAAAHHH!"

"Linna, I'll save you for sure, so please stay calm and listen—"

Sylia, switching to external audio, spoke as if to soothe Linna.

"I'm going to throw a Bee-Chip. Catch it and attach it to the Boomer. You know where, right?"

"O-Of course I do! But while I'm doing that—"

"Trust me! Here it comes!"

Sylia took advantage of the moment the Boomer's attention went to Priss and threw the Bee-Chip. Linna, reaching out from the Boomer's arms, twisted her body and, in a half-desperate move, pressed the Bee-Chip onto the back of the Boomer's neck.

"It's done! Now what? Is this going to save me?" Linna yelled.

"Priss, get away! And you, jump off the south side too!"

"W-What!?"

Priss had just ducked behind a solar panel to avoid the Boomer's heat-ray cannon. The Boomer was standing on the south edge. For some reason, Sylia fired a laser in a completely different direction.

However, starting from that point, a yellow streak of light ran across the floor. That line progressed so as to circle the spot where the Boomer stood. And the moment it reached the edge of the building, a dull *grumble-grumble* sound rose from beneath their feet.

(Has Operation E finally reached count zero—!?)

For an instant, Priss felt a paralyzing sense of dread. However, the only part that began to collapse was the south side where the Boomer stood. The solar panel, fence, protective wall, floor, and the Boomer holding Linna that were there suddenly and all at once felt as if they were being forcibly pulled and peeled away by something, cascading down toward the ground tens of meters below.

"Priss, jump!!"

Sylia's voice echoed in Priss's helmet like a whip. Priss cleared the fence and danced into the void blurred by rain clouds. At that moment, the entire KK Media Station, which boasted the highest altitude in the surrounding district, was enveloped in a roar. The walls crumbled like sand, and the shattered glass flowed like glittering stars; near the ground, clouds of dust swirled as if from a giant rocket launchpad.

Priss, who had changed into Moto Slave mode and was descending while circling the building, looked back to see the roof—the very footing she had just jumped from—crumbling away fragilly, though not as rapidly as the lower parts.

(If we were in there, we wouldn't have stood a chance. In an instant, with no way to help ourselves...)

Priss felt as if she were seeing the fragility and peril of the world she now inhabited. That peril was layered many times over in the sky. Humans lived by clinging to the surface, which had finally found a balance.

(Even if we escape like this on Moto Slaves, how far can we really say we've flown from there? How much trouble can we say we've avoided—?)

No matter how strongly she wished, she could not keep flying forever. Because life in Genom City was all upon that fragile surface, and Priss's reason for living was also only to be found there.

"KYAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

Linna screamed with all her might. If she didn't, she surely would have fainted. If she was going to die, it would certainly be easier to stay unconscious. But Sylia had said she would definitely save her.

(Sylia wouldn't lie. I'll be saved. I'm definitely going to be saved. I can't afford to faint!)

She screamed those words in her heart with a prayer-like feeling, closing her eyes tight and gritting her teeth to push the fear even a little further away.

The time Linna was actually falling through the air after being released from the Boomer's arms was only about two seconds.

But to her, it felt like several minutes. Suddenly, her entire body was softly enveloped by something. The sound of the building collapsing, the heavy sound of rain, and the city's clamor—all those various sounds seemed to have mostly vanished. Though there were two or three large jolts, Linna's body merely bounced against the soft and pleasant fabric each time.

Snip.

A small slit was made in the fabric, and suddenly air rushed in and the fabric weighed heavily on her body.

"Do the rest yourself and get out of there. You didn't actually faint, did you?"

The voice she heard was Nene's. Linna suddenly regained her spirit and crawled out.

"I'm... I'm alive? I was saved! I'm alive!"

Linna jumped onto Nene in her Hard Suit and started hopping up and down.

"Hey! Your DJ part-time job is over and you've been freed from the Boomer, so stop acting so crazy. You could at least say thanks for saving you, don't you think?"

Nene spoke in an ironic tone as if exasperated, but her voice was lively.

"Then—"

Linna looked back at the bag-like thing she had crawled out of. It was a Rescue Balloon—rescue equipment loaded onto Nene's Moto Slave. It was fired from under the bike's seat and softly enveloped the target. It would inflate into a rugby ball shape in just one second, designed to absorb the impact even if it hit something. Nene had aimed at Linna as she left the Boomer's hands and successfully protected her with the Rescue Balloon.

"Th-thank you, Nene. If I'd known this would happen, I would have been nicer to you. Even tonight, I thought for a fleeting second that I might invite you to the studio."

"You've got to be kidding! I've had quite enough of being kidnapped by a Boomer. Besides, if I'd gone there, who would have been able to rescue you!?"

"Th-that's true... Oh, where are Priss and Sylia?"

"The Boomer was stubborn and survived by landing on the neighboring building. It seems it smashed through two or three floors, though. But Sylia had already calculated that and went after it with Priss. We can't stay here either. Come on, hurry!"

Nene pulled her Moto Slave toward the elevator room. As Linna looked around, she saw that this was the roof of an old hotel on the south side of the building where the broadcasting station had been. The neighboring building, which should have towered dozens of meters higher, was nowhere to be seen.

"The AD Police blockheads jumped the gun and executed the operation to demolish the building you were in along with the Boomer. That's why Mackie was desperately calling your communicator and the AD Police were blaring evacuation orders. But you were so absorbed in being a DJ that you didn't notice a thing. Honestly..."

As soon as they got into the elevator, Nene took off her helmet and pouted.

"Ah... I see! It was the studio, it's because I was in the studio!"

"The studio?"

"Yes. The studio is surrounded by soundproof walls, and it perfectly blocks radio waves too. That's why no calls reached me. Oh, so that was it. When I was being carried by the Boomer up that dizzying atrium, I was really sad because I thought everyone had abandoned me and run away..."

"Well, I'm just glad you're safe. Oh, we've reached the first floor. Linna, there's no time to be complacent. The Boomer is still alive. Follow me!"

Nene slipped out the back exit of the deserted hotel and, with Linna on the back, sped through the midnight streets. Word must have spread that the building demolition and Boomer commotion had been suppressed. The district was starting to bustle again with onlookers and people looking to enjoy the midnight hour.

"Mackie, were you able to access the Boomer?"

Nene asked as she jumped into the Command Carrie. Parked in a corner of an underground parking lot of a building several blocks away from where the Boomer commotion had occurred, the brightly colored Command Carrie was stopped so as to avoid public notice.

"Yeah, since it's the second time. I've finished setting it up so that all the data the Bee-Chip picks up is automatically filed. Right now, I'm trying to crawl into the Boomer's cyberbrain somehow using the transmitter Sis modified and attached to the Bee-Chip… but damn it, this is quite a troublesome piece of work."

Mackie murmured as if talking to himself, his eyes fixed on the monitor. His hands flew over the keyboard with blinding speed. This was the computer console set up urgently in a corner of the Command Carrie's rear. The reason there weren't many computers like before was probably that he was sending the data collected here to the penthouse and having the interconnected computer groups read it.

"I'll help too—"

Nene, who had quickly stripped off her Hard Suit, sat down beside Mackie in her battle lingerie.

The receiver on the wall started ringing. Linna hurriedly put the handset to her ear.

"It's Linna? Nene successfully rescued you, didn't she?"

It was Sylia. But contrary to her words, Sylia's voice was tense and fast-paced, and her heavy breathing was clear even through the handset.

"Yes, thanks to Nene and you, Sylia. Congratulations. So, what happened to the Boomer?"

Linna asked urgently into the microphone.

"We're pursuing it, but it's still inside a building. (Priss, you go around to the passage on the left! Corner it on the next turn…) How is it, has Mackie been able to link to the Boomer's cyberbrain?"

"Nene is working on it with him—"

"I-It seems it's quite difficult. I'll call you later!"

Upon hearing that, Sylia's response was cut short, as if she was so pressed that she didn't even have time to switch between her intermittent conversation with Priss and her communication with the others. It seemed to be a desperate situation. Once things settled down, Sylia asked Linna, "Can you fight?"

"Me? Of course! That Boomer put me through so much. I'll finish the bastard with my own hands!"

Linna answered vigorously and confirmed Sylia's current location. After hanging up, she immediately began to strip off her clothes. Linna, who was sensitive to the latest trends and loved flashy things, rarely set foot in such a place. She couldn't care less about Mackie's gaze as he realized her strip-down. Even so, Mackie was desperate with his computer operations and had no leisure to peep at Linna's changing.

After she finished equipping her Hard Suit, Linna operated the conveyor herself, lowered her Moto Slave from the place where it was stored, and jumped out onto the street just dozens of seconds later. The district Sylia had mentioned was quite deep within that Habitation Zone.

If it were a Habitation Zone on the east side of the Grand Canyon, it wouldn't be particularly rare, but as was common in such places, the Boomer had fled into a labyrinth-like slum. Linna stood still in spite of herself. People were coming out of buildings here and there having heard of the Boomer's appearance, but there was also a man lying on the dirty street in a posture that could be mistaken for a sack, a drug-addicted woman looking out a window and grinning, and a girl attacked by a vagrant in the midst of the confusion crying out for help—a chaotic mess beyond control.

"Ugh, what a terrible place..."

Linna felt bewildered, as if she had been left out.

"S-Sylia, where are you!?"

When she turned on her communicator, she shouted as if asking for help.

"It seems you're okay, for now."

"Linna, will you follow Priss and the Boomer? I'm worried about Mackie and Nene. I'm going back to the Command Carrie. Okay, I'll leave the rest to you!"

But Sylia, without minding Linna, mounted the Moto Slave Linna had come on and sped away in an instant.

"Oh, I don't care anymore! At this rate, I'll thoroughly beat down that hateful Boomer!"

While grumbling, the next moment Linna nimbly cleared a fence and dashed into a pitch-black building. Priss was already some distance ahead, beyond several more turns in the alleyways. Feeling that fighting the Boomer was much better than wandering the labyrinth alone, Linna started her Moto Slave. As she proceeded slowly through the narrow alleyway, Priss's voice suddenly caught her ear.

"What is that Boomer bastard thinking..."

It was a toy factory that had long since fallen out of use. The remains of dolls that could only be thought of as twentieth-century sensibilities were scattered about.

"Linna—!"

Linna was startled and looked up to find the Boomer about to jump down onto her head from the cheap synthetic slate that had been nailed to the window in place of glass. Linna instinctively pushed her Moto Slave away and dodged to the side.

The Boomer then dove over the crumbling wall on the opposite side. Priss followed right after without hesitation.

"Are you okay, Linna?"

Sylia helped her up. Because she had dived into a pile of trash cans, slimy things were thickly attached to her visor, but there was nothing unusual.

"Priss"

Linna ran down the passage.

"Linna, don't come, it's dangerous!"

At the same time Priss shouted, the Boomer's heat-ray cannon spat fire.

"Kyaa!"

Though she let out a short scream, Linna nimbly jumped near the passage ceiling, grabbed one of the pipes running there, and with just a slight recoil, dove into the cover where Priss was.

"Tsk, that Boomer, it's escaped again."

Priss clicked her tongue as she advanced further down the passage. Linna followed fearfully. The ceiling wall at the end of the passage was melted like candy, with a gaping hole. The sound of the Boomer's feet running over the iron floor—*clatter-clatter-clatter-clatter*—could be heard. Priss and Linna quickly climbed up through that hole.

It was a factory about the size of a small gymnasium, with machinery cleared away. A small room that looked like a breakroom in the corner was lit, and the door was left open.

"Damn, that's the fourth victim..."

Priss muttered regretfully as she looked down at a vagrant who had died after having his head split with a single blow, having half-emerged from a blanket.

"F-fourth... then, in exchange for me being saved, four people were killed by the Boomer!?"

Linna's voice was shrill.

"No, that's not it. It's Sylia's orders. We shouldn't kill the Boomer."

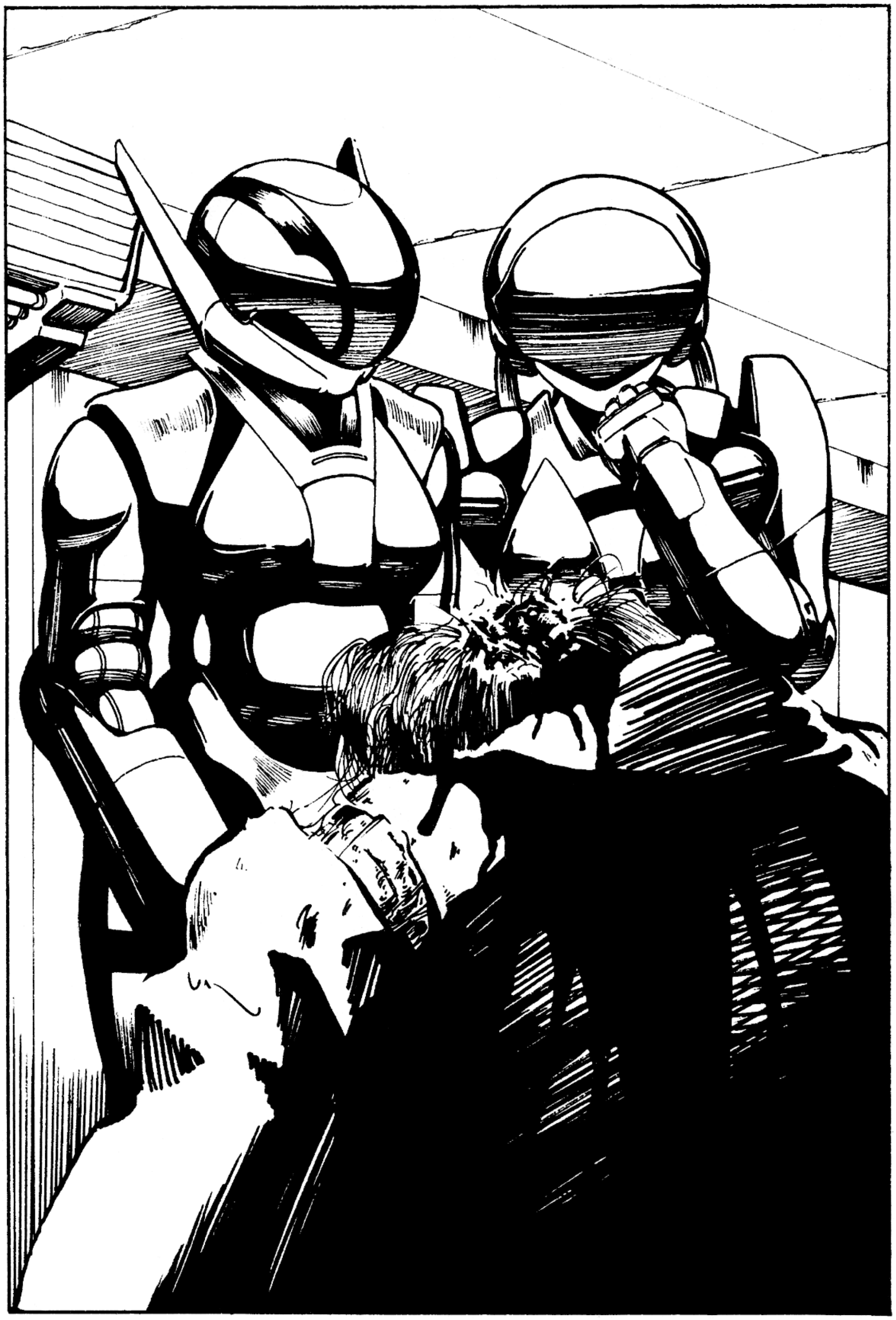
"Don't kill the Boomer? What on earth does that mean, Priss? You're saying we should just sit by and watch while the Boomer rampages around?"

"We're pursuing the Boomer to interfere as much as possible with it trying to harm humans. We've already saved several people from dangerous spots. But to keep the damage at zero without defeating the Boomer is an impossible task anyway."

"What is Sylia thinking!?"

"To confirm the reason the Boomer went crazy. It's partly to prevent further major damage, but apparently, behind this commotion, a massive conspiracy that we wouldn't even dream of is hidden..."

Saying this, Priss stared into the dark void where the rain continued to fall through the broken window where the Boomer had seemingly escaped.



"Yes! I finally linked to the Boomer's cyberbrain!"

Mackie let out a cheer.

"R-Really!?"

Nene threw aside the keyboard she had been operating and hurried to Mackie's monitor.

"Whoa, how'd you do it?"

"Yeah. I was trying to find the command to access the cyberbrain just like Nene, but I couldn't get anywhere, so I tried a different method."

"The 'hole' you were talking about earlier—that is, sensory organs like ears and noses. I used that as a hint and put together a makeshift program. Look, first, I made a program that reacts to our signals to control or extract information from the cyberbrain. Then, I broke that program into pieces and built it into the audio waveform signals. When I ran it into the Boomer's sensory system through the Bee-Chip's transmitter, sure enough, it swallowed it thinking it was just noise."

Mackie gave a proud wink with one eye.

"I see," Priss replied. "The moment the Boomer tried to listen to the sound and reconstructed the data, the program obeying our commands started running inside the Boomer's cyberbrain… You did it, Mackie!"

"That's how it works," Mackie said excitedly. "Now, all we have to do is transmit the cyberbrain control program Sis made separately and let the program inside the Boomer draw it in. Then the Boomer will be doing whatever we want!"

Mackie eagerly set the data chip Sylia had made into the computer drive and began busily pounding the keys.

"But, it feels like this is going almost too easily…"

"Heh-heh. To tell the truth, this was Sis's idea." Mackie stuck his tongue out.

"I figured that out right away. For one thing, there's no way you could put together such a sophisticated program in such a short amount of time. But that's not what I'm talking about. I mean, the Boomer's cyberbrain is supposed to be the pinnacle of modern computer technology, yet it's letting us invade it so… simply."

"That's why the hard part starts now. To the Boomer, the invading program is a foreign object. The cyberbrain will desperately try to eliminate it. First, it's a battle against the guard programs!"

Mackie’s expression turned serious. The monitor switched from the data display to a simulation image that looked like a video game. The yellow octagon located in the center was the lead program that had slipped in earlier, disguised as audio data. Aiming for it, one of the Boomer’s guard programs, which had been sorting the data, launched an attack. The guard programs were represented by blue square frames, from which red dots were frequently fired at the lead program with a *pip, pip* sound. The red dots were electromagnetic elements designed to destroy and erase data.

Mackie skillfully manipulated the keyboard to make the octagonal lead program dodge around. Eventually, an oval-shaped, white cyberbrain-control program appeared on the right edge of the screen. it was several times larger than the lead program or the guard programs. However, it had no power to move freely. Unless the lead program pulled it in, it could not enter completely.

The Boomer’s side increased to three guard programs. Apparently, seeing that a single auditory guard program couldn't crush the lead program, the guard programs in charge of selecting other sensory data had been summoned. Three against one—the disadvantage of the lead program was obvious. The new guard programs moved to flank the lead program in a pincer maneuver.

"Watch out!"

Nene let out a shout that was close to a scream. A guard program that had moved behind let fire an electromagnetic element toward the path of the lead program, which was moving toward the upper left to dodge another attack.

"Damn it!"

Mackie pounded the ten-key pad so violently it seemed he might break the keyboard. At the moment it looked like the red dot of the electromagnetic element would collide, the octagonal lead program suddenly split in two, and the red dot slipped through the gap. The two halves of the octagon fled separately, matching the movements of Mackie’s two hands.

"I'll take over one of them!" Nene reached out from beside Mackie.

"No, there’s no end to it if we just run around separately. It’s meaningless unless we merge—" Mackie said, his eyes darting busily across the screen.

"Then, what on earth should we do...?"

The cyberbrain-control program, which was about halfway into the image, had not moved at all since the lead program began running around. Only when the entirety of the control program fully entered the image—breaking through the protective elements that acted like an eggshell protecting the main body of the program—and the control program spread throughout the entire image, would they be able to dominate the Boomer’s cyberbrain and move it as they wished.

A stray shot from an electromagnetic element fired by a guard program hit the protective element wall surrounding the control program and vanished effortlessly.

(That’s it! If we use the protective elements…!)

Nene hurried to her own computer. When she typed in a command, an image identical to Mackie’s was projected. Nene accessed the cyberbrain-control program.

"Wh-What are you doing, Nene!?" Mackie shouted.

"I'm going to hurl the control program's protective elements at the guard programs!"

White dots peeled off one after another from the oval control program. The parts where the protective elements were missing became small dents, leaving the control program exposed.

"I-If you do that, the control program will be totally naked… and besides, if a protective element hits it, even the lead program will be taken out!"

Mackie desperately fled, frantically dodging the white dots that came flying after the red dots.

"But this is the only way left!!"

Nene fired the protective elements one after another at the guard programs.

The simulation battle within the cyberbrain seemed as if it would continue forever. The Boomer being toyed with inside its head was surely rampaging uncontrollably by now…

"We did it. The guard programs are wiped out!"

Nene reflexively clapped her hands and jumped up and down.

"Whew, what a reckless thing to do. Man, I felt like my life was being shortened…"

Mackie slowly operated the keys. As if being pulled by the octagon, the control program moved to the center of the screen. The protective wall on the left side of the oval was almost entirely gone. The moment its movement stopped, the elements that had formed the protective wall vanished in a flash, and the lead program merged with the cyberbrain-control program.

"Alright, now the cyberbrain-control program will activate. It's finally this guy's turn."

Mackie returned the monitor to the data screen, brought over something like a sun visor covered in a mess of electrodes from the pilot's seat, and connected it to the computer. Then, he pulled the sun visor completely over his head and lowered black goggles to cover his eyes.

"I made this just as Sis told me to. I haven't experimented with it even once yet, so I don't know if it'll work, but in an emergency like this, I have no choice but to do it for real. I call it the 'Boomer Control Headgear.' Now, I'm practically a Boomer myself!"

Mackie crawled his hands over the keyboard and pressed several keys by touch. It seemed he could not see the outside through the goggles. Mackie's cheeks occasionally twitched with spasms. Then, he opened his mouth wide and took a deep breath. His movements—twisting his neck slightly or bracing his elbows firmly—were like a machine.

It was then. Mackie suddenly stood up, and just as it seemed he would jump, he kicked the side wall of the Command Carry with great force. There was a cracking sound. It was certain that he had cracked a bone in his foot. It had been an incredibly reckless kick. However, Mackie showed no sign of being in pain.

(No... it can't be...)

"Stop! Stop it, Mackie!"

Nene jumped onto Mackie's back as he was about to charge headlong into another side wall.

"Nene, what is all this noise?"

Sylia, dressed in her Hard Suit, shouted as she entered through the rear door. Because Mackie had begun rampaging, Sylia's clothes and the computer peripherals were scattered all over the place.

"S-Sylia, stop Mackie! He's gone crazy!"

"Wh-What did you say!?"

"It's probably because he was flooded with a massive amount of information the moment he integrated with the Boomer's cyberbrain. Human beings are constantly absorbing a vast amount of information, even more than a Boomer. But because we unconsciously sort through it or react only to things that have meaning, we don't get that confused. But to a Boomer, all information is of equal value. Mackie was swallowed by a wave of information, his consciousness became muddled, and before he could judge the content of the information and decide his will, the Boomer part of him reacted to the info. Then, the commands issued by the cyberbrain were transmitted to Mackie's linked body."

"H-How terrifying… So, instead of controlling the Boomer, he ended up being controlled by it."

Nene stared fearfully at the headgear in Sylia's hands as if she were looking at a monster.

"It's definitely because of this…" Sylia muttered. She thought deeply, removing just the goggles from the headgear to peer through them or pressing her ear to the earpiece.

"That's the machine for piloting the Boomer, right? Why did it turn out like this?" Nene asked while nursing the unconscious Mackie.

Mackie had rampaged with incredible strength, and they likely wouldn't have been able to restrain him if Sylia hadn't appeared in her Hard Suit. He had become quiet the moment the headgear was removed, but he had apparently suffered quite a shock and lost consciousness. Occasionally he grimaced, perhaps from the pain in his fractured leg.

"Sylia, you don't mean…!" Nene's expression became filled with terror.

"Yes, this time I will do it. Wear your Hard Suit and hold me down so I don't start rampaging. If it looks dangerous, turn off the computer."

Nene had no choice but to nod at Sylia's perfectly calm voice. Nene donned her Hard Suit and wrapped both arms around the waist of Sylia—who was down to just her battle lingerie—holding her firmly in place.

"I'm ready, Nene."

Sylia's fingertips fumbled over the keyboard. After a while, Sylia's body grew stiff and rigid. Nene could feel her neck suddenly jerk and her shoulders twitch slightly.

"Sylia, hang in there…" Nene whispered.

Sylia kept her eyes tightly shut. She made a conscious effort not to pay attention to the noise rushing into her ears. By gradually habituating her senses in that way, she entered into the Boomer.

When she slowly opened her eyes, the Boomer's field of vision spread out through the 3D scope built into the goggles. It was atop a corrugated laminate-slate roof that was peeling here and there. When she thought, *I'll turn my head*, her gaze began to turn—slowly, but surely—and captured what was behind. As she willed her eyes to shift their focus, the camera moved its focal point like it was focusing a lens.

A single figure wearing vivid colored armor and a helmet jumped onto the roof from a window with broken glass. It was Linna. Turning her neck in the opposite direction, a marine blue Hard Suit came into view, running across the rooftop of the adjacent faux-concrete building.

"Priss!"

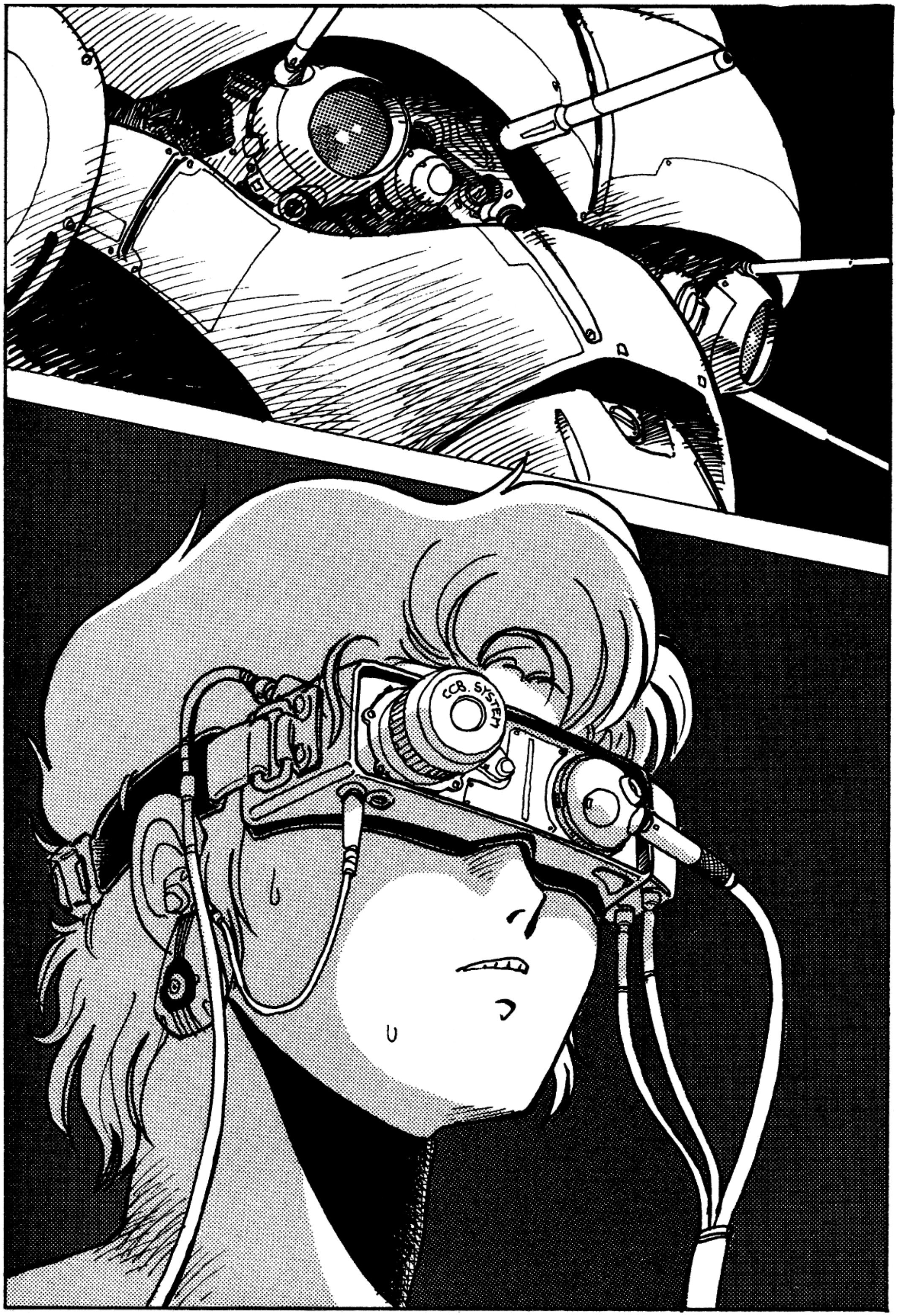
Sylia intended to call out that way. However, what reached Sylia's own ears was a groaning sound—"Guguru"—the unmistakable voice of a Boomer.

Priss spotted the Boomer standing still on the laminate slate and immediately readied the railgun on her arm. Sensing danger, the Boomer's brain began to work busily. It was simultaneously envisioning escape and attack. Information came rushing in one after another, plunging Sylia's mind into confusion.

(This sensation...)

An old memory brushed against the corner of Sylia's mind. It was strikingly similar to what had happened to her when she played a specific memory chip—left for her by her father, Dr. Stephen Stingray, the leading figure in Boomer development, after he died in the accident and fire at V-Laboratory where he served as director—on a designated machine.

Various events that occurred during the development of the Boomers, the impressions they left, the anxiety and suspicion that they might be misused... such psychological things from her father, along with the world's peak scientific knowledge and theories stored in his brain, his transcendent skills, and the scientific power and information that progressed boundlessly.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"Even the high ideals of wanting to be useful for the peace and prosperity of the world—various matters such as these had flowed all at once into the brain of Sylia when she was a mere child of barely ten years old. It had also been an experiment in a revolutionary method of brain development. Normally, the human brain never exerts even a fraction of its potential. If a way to draw out the latent power of the brain could be found, even an ordinary person could possess several times the ability of those called geniuses.

Undoubtedly, Sylia's father, Dr. Stingray, must have perfected that technology during the development of the Boomers. Whether that technology was lost with his death, or whether it had been secretly passed on to others, there was no way of knowing. However, at the very least, the brain development method had achieved a brilliant success in Sylia alone. Sylia possessed a brain that could likely rival several of GENOM's top technical staff members. Yet, it was a cruel irony of fate that she had resolved to use that power to eradicate the crimes caused by the Boomers her father had developed.

(But the cyberdroids Father intended to develop weren't supposed to be such loathsome existences as these things called "Boomers." If Father is watching the chaos of this Tinsel City from heaven, how sad he must be...)

For Sylia, forming the Knight Sabers and fighting the Boomers was also a requiem for her father.

(If that's the case, then it's only natural that the sensation I felt just now is strikingly similar to what I experienced when the information flowed in from the memory machine...)

Sylia thought this while being showered with a massive amount of information gathered as she desperately tried to judge the situation with Priss's gun muzzle pointed at her.

(It's a fact that I thought, "I don't want to be shot by Priss." And while I can understand information for finding a way to escape flowing in, why even information for attacking...)

"Priss," Sylia spoke cautiously.

Priss gasped and stared at the Boomer before her. "Sylia... is that you, Sylia?!"

"WITH THIS, THE BOOMER IS FINALLY AT MY COMMAND!"

The Boomer spoke in Sylia’s tone. The fact that the faltering in the speech was gradually disappearing was proof of how much Sylia was becoming accustomed to piloting the Boomer.

"Y-You did it, Sylia!"

Deeply moved, Priss jumped onto the laminate-slate roof and approached, thrusting her right hand forward to ask for a handshake.

Chapter 7

"THIS IS… THE BOOMER!!"

The moment it shouted, the Boomer pushed aside Linna, who had come up beside it, and began racing across the roof. Capturing that image of Priss inside the goggles, Sylia had also tried to extend her right hand. And yet, that was the moment it happened.

Something like a "shudder" attacked her. A chill ran across the skin of her entire body. Focus became unstable from the back of her head, and Priss's figure blurred.

"W-What's going on—"

Priss stood frozen for a moment, but then immediately helped Linna up and chased after the Boomer.

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Inside the Boomer, Sylia was screaming. Her body had begun to move on its own—that was how it felt. Aside from the fact that Sylia's own thoughts and will were surprised by this sudden turn of events, they didn't seem that disturbed.

The standing Boomer awkwardly nodded its head.

"What?! Th-This Boomer is Sylia?" Linna, who had taken a defensive stance across from the Boomer, let out a startled cry.

"I-I HAVE HIJACKED THE BOOMER'S CYBERBRAIN."

Faltering words spilled from the Boomer's mouth. It was eerie that it sounded like a man's voice no matter how one heard it, but that was because the vocal cords had been constructed to match the man used for the disguise. The Boomer slowly raised one hand and took a pose pointing to the back of its neck.

(Hah, could it be! It's like I'm being pressed and approached by a "gun" pointed at the back of my head…)

Sylia quickly closed her eyes and made an effort to ignore the influx of information that was surging in once again. Concentrating her nerves only on producing her voice accurately, she shouted.

"STAY BACK, PRISS! THE BOOMER IS ALIVE! THIS ISN'T ME!"

Sylia didn't feel like she was being controlled. Yet, it was a fact that for an instant, Priss felt like an enemy. And it was also a fact that a sensation like a frantic urge to somehow escape this place had seized her entire body.

(What on earth is this…?)

While running as if being dragged by something, Sylia desperately tried to remain calm.

(Priss… there is someone else inside of me. Someone who almost overlaps with me, yet regards you as an enemy, fears the muzzle of your railgun, and seeks to flee—yes, the Boomer!)

Mackie's link couldn't have been insufficient. If that was the case, then the Boomer's cyberbrain, which she was supposed to have hijacked, still had a deeper layer to it.

(I see… I could endure it because it was me, but Mackie lost himself because he gave in to this surging impulse…)

A strong sense of urgency—a consciousness of crisis—existed right beside Sylia. Since it wasn't Sylia's own sensation or consciousness, it was impossible for her to suppress or calm that excitement. However, the Boomer body that was moving it was something Sylia shared. If she concentrated her own consciousness like she had earlier, she might be able to stop it. But once a Boomer began to rampage, it wasn't easily halted.

(No, I must do it by any means, or this Boomer will repeat more destruction and slaughter. The next murder would leave its sensation clearly on my own hands—)

(How can I do it?) Sylia desperately searched for a clue.

The Boomer ran along the rooftops of the shack district in the middle of the night under heavy rain, gradually approaching the original city center. It crossed fiber-optic cables, used laundry pipe decks as footholds, and jumped toward emergency stairs. An old, multi-tenant building—a product of endless additions and extensions—came into view ahead.

(Boomers are weak in complex, maze-like places. That's because they are surrounded by a massive amount of information, making it difficult to judge how to move. Alright, there…)

Leaping far above a narrow alley, the Boomer aimed for the terrace of the multi-tenant building. Sylia concentrated her entire nervous system into one, waiting for the moment of the Boomer's landing. Information regarding the terrace's material, structure, and width flowed in, and the Boomer's body adjusted its posture. The jump angle and the countdown to measure the landing timing were displayed one after another as text and figures at the bottom-left edge of Sylia's field of vision.

—Gobo.

The sound of imitation concrete giving way rang out, the Boomer lost its balance, and it fell into a hole that had opened beneath its feet. Aiming for the moment of landing, Sylia had used all her strength to stomp through the building's terrace.

The place was a storage room piled high with old furniture, chairs with broken legs, and beds with protruding springs. If it were an ordinary Boomer, it wouldn't suddenly start moving when shoved into a place like this; it would absorb as much information as possible before acting. The Boomer linked to Sylia also stopped its movement for a moment. However, that burning impulse returned once more. It kicked away the sofa its feet were buried in and crushed an ivory chair leaning against its shoulder with its arms. Then, it actually used its thermal cannon to sweep away the mountain of junk blocking its path.

(Damn it, I intended to calm the Boomer down, but I've only made it more enraged!)

Sylia regretted it, but it was too late. The Boomer smashed through a scorched wall with a body-blow and emerged into a hallway. Seeing Priss and Linna jumping down from the emergency stairs on the side, the Boomer began running in the opposite direction. At the end of the hall was a narrow staircase that wound downward. Heedless of the walls crumbling on both sides, the Boomer forced its way down as if squeezing its body through. But the stairs remained stiflingly narrow. A wooden door appeared on the right…

As expected, seeking an exit to escape this suffocating place as quickly as possible, the Boomer kicked the door open. It was a residence—poor and cramped, yet neatly arranged. There were no windows leading outside. Tipping over a cupboard and pushing aside a cheap table, the Boomer slammed into the door leading to the next room.

A lamp flickered on behind the blown-open door. From a semi-double bed, a naked man and woman jumped out with expressions twisted in terror and pressed themselves against the wall. The Boomer ignored them and headed for the window. However, a child on a small bed by the window pointed a toy machine gun at the Boomer, glaring with an expression full of hostility.

(N-No, little boy—!)

The voltage of "crisis" rose rapidly in the Boomer's head.

"Priss, shoot! Shoot the Boomer! Hurry!!" Sylia was screaming desperately.

Just as it raised both hands to crush the child, a violent shock ran through the Boomer's back and the back of its head. At that moment, Sylia's consciousness was lost.

Four days later,Sylia's penthouse rooftop residence:

The Boomer incident that had completely destroyed a fifty-story building and the heavy rain that had fallen all night seemed almost like a lie.

"Ah—" Priss reached for the bandage wrapped like a bandana around her head. Sylia directed a gaze of sympathy toward her. Since that night, Sylia had become increasingly concerned about the girl. When she remembered the sensation of being showered by waves of information while linked to the Boomer—the way her father's memory chip data had flowed in—she felt as if something had brushed against the corner of her mind. But it had immediately returned to being closed in darkness, perhaps due to the shock of the incident.

In that moment, she felt as though something had brushed against the corner of her mind. However, due to the shock of the incident, that sensation had once again been shuttered away in darkness.

Just then, the elevator doors opened and Nene appeared. She was carrying a massive bouquet of flowers with both hands—a gesture that was quintessentially Nene.

"Are you okay, Sylia? I should have taken your headgear off sooner..."

"No, your timing was perfect, Nene. I was able to disconnect right before the Boomer exploded."

"Yeah... but we ended up wrecking an entire building and still didn't manage to take out the Puma," Nene sighed.

"Hey, you look pretty energetic. The weather's great out there—you can see the clear blue sky through the blinds."

The person who stepped out of the elevator next was Priss, holding a single flower. Carrying just one flower was, in turn, quintessentially Priss.

"Thanks. Mackie, who's sleeping in the room downstairs, still seems to be hit by bouts of terror sometimes, but I'm well enough to stand and walk now."

Sylia sat up in bed to receive the flower, bringing it to her nose to enjoy the scent.

"But I heard you had quite a disaster yourself, Priss. Are your injuries alright?"

"That airheaded leader, Leon, the guy who gave the orders? Apparently, he got chewed out big time. But get this—even though she was supposed to have died along with that building, Linna survived. During the interrogation, she obviously told them the Knight Sabers saved her, so the AD Police are in an uproar. To hide their incompetence, they officially announced that the building destruction and the slum incident were caused by two different, unrelated Boomers going berserk. Isn't that terrible?"

"But saying two Boomers went haywire at almost the exact same time is a pretty transparent excuse, don't you think?" Priss said with a look of exasperation.

"Well, that's the thing... In that same area, at almost the exact same time, there were actually *two more* incidents that could only be explained as the work of berserk Boomers. Whether it's three cases or four, it doesn't make much of a difference to them."

"Two more? In the same area?" Sylia asked, her expression tightening.

Priss had returned to her garage apartment in Linna’s car. After leaving the nursing duties to Nene, Priss had carried the sleeping Erindira on her back to the stairs. But as she started up, someone struck her from behind. When she came to, the sky was already beginning to lighten. Aside from a sharp pain and some bleeding from her head, she was fine—but Erindira had vanished without a trace.

"So, have you found the girl?"

At Sylia’s question, Priss silently shook her head. Despite nursing a cold from the rain and the pain of her wound, Priss had walked until her legs felt like lead searching for her, but there wasn't a single lead.

"I'm planning to go look for her again today after I finish up a few errands."

"I see… that’s rough."

"Wait, you weren't listening to Nene," Sylia interjected. "What about you, Priss? You were linked with that crazed Boomer. Did you notice anything unusual besides the one we were chasing?"

"Well… it depends on how you define 'crazy,' but when I reached out my hand to shake hands on the roof, the Boomer seemed to perceive it as an attack. And then it started running like it had lost its mind again…"

Nene walked over to a transparent resin display board and pointed out the exact locations. One was at the edge of the Industry Zone, and the other was in the neighboring Habitation Zone. If you drew a straight line, neither was more than a kilometer away from the building Linna had been in.

"Sylia, what on earth does this mean?" Priss asked with a serious face.

"Hmm. Perhaps a powerful radio wave or signal capable of driving Boomers mad was broadcast over that entire area that night…" Sylia tilted her head, murmuring to herself.

"No, the AD Police already checked that thoroughly. There's absolutely no way there was a powerful signal…"

"Hey, I was just thinking. What about Sylia, who was merged with the crazy Boomer? Didn't you think of anything like a cause?"

"Well… it's also a question of how one defines 'going crazy,' but look, when you reached out your hand on the roof to shake hands, it seems the Boomer took that as an attack."

A look of tension flashed across Sylia and Priss's faces.

"And then it started running again like it had lost its mind… Come to think of it, I felt that way too. When I saw the Boomer Linna and I were chasing climbing up the atrium, I got the feeling it was 'fleeing desperately'."

"That's it. It's 'fear'. That is what the Boomer was feeling. That thing like an impulse that surged up from deep within the Boomer—if you were to apply it to a human, it was precisely a sense of fear." Sylia spoke while reflecting on the terror of that moment.

"A lot of things could be explained if we assume the Boomer did them because it was scared. For a crazed Boomer, even a toy gun pointed by a child becomes a source of fear. And as we experienced, the Boomer's fear becomes something that incites relentless aggression, rather than just fleeing."

"Aggression—?"

"Because it's a machine, it can kill people or crack safes without hesitation. Even if surrounded by the AD Police, it can escape calmly—that's the biggest merit for those who use Boomers. On top of that, they have judgment and thinking power superior to humans. But what if they could feel fear? In one fell swoop, that greatest merit is lost, and humans would actually be better since they at least have desires and loyalty."

"I see! If we find the cause that made the Boomer go crazy and apply it to other Boomers, we can strip them of their strength. At the very least, if it's known that Boomers have a major weakness, their market value will plummet. Boomers are expensive. Both those who make them and those who buy them will surely hesitate. If that happens, the total extinction of Boomers is only a step away. Hey, this is a revolutionary discovery!"

Priss stood up from her chair, her eyes shining.

"That's right, Priss. But impressing upon the whole world that Boomers are useless is a huge task. On a scale like this, even the AD Police level can cover it up. Even if you consider all the Boomers in Tinsel City going on a rampage…

well, it would be a disaster several times worse than a Great Earthquake by the time we suppressed it. We mustn't forget that."

"But if we assume that's a fact, we and the AD Police wouldn't have nearly enough hands. Even if the USSD or the military were deployed, it would be after a catastrophe. Besides, a Boomer is a killing weapon. For a combat machine to be afraid of its opponent—who would believe such a ridiculous thing!!" Nene said, as if appealing to Priss and Sylia in turn.

"You're right. And while I couldn't completely hijack the Boomer's cyberbrain, the B-Chip still has uses. There are only two days left until the deadline for the contract with the AD Police. We need to get sample data from a normal combat Boomer by any means. If you're going to search for Elenndira, I want you to keep that in mind too."

Saying this, Sylia placed a new B-Chip in Priss's hand.

Priss first headed north on the Super Expressway, then turned right as she approached District 6, where the GENOM Tower loomed. Although Tinsel City—where factories and housing had carpeted the ground—had long ago surpassed its capacity limits, the Jingu Forest remained almost as it was at the end of the 20th century, having only been replanted with artificial trees. The sheer contrast with the surroundings felt artificial and hollow rather than comforting. In the current Tinsel City, things like urban environmental maintenance were nothing more than a pipe dream.

If the Jingu Forest was the only thing left, it was, of course, because of the massive capital investment from GENOM, the greatest mega-corp in the Western world.

Leaving the four-layered, six-lane expressway that crossed the city center midway, Priss rode her bike along a tree-lined road. Eventually, a round silver object came into view beyond the trees. It was the Jingu Dome, the mecca for various professional sports and events. It was being used as the venue for the World Folk Music Festival sponsored by GENOM.

Only the top portion of the main body was visible yet, but in the surrounding roads and squares, gates with flamboyant decorations and outdoor festival venues were being set up. This music festival was showing an extraordinary level of success, not merely as a musical exchange, but due to the political and economic expectations placed on the information network to be launched through the giant circuits of the broadcasting satellite GENOM had put into orbit.

The top leaders of the major Eastern and Western nations, heads of giant corporations, and representatives of economic organizations had already entered Tinsel City several days ago. Every night, parties were held at luxury hotels everywhere, and secret talks and deals were reportedly flourishing in suite rooms.

Representing the flashy public side were world-class musicians, orchestras, singers, and performers. While there were numerous appearances from every musical genre, the most popular were the pop singers and groups, said to number 800 people in total. Adding color to this were nearly half as many top stars of video movies and TV personalities. The reason several temporary outdoor festival venues had been set up around the Jingu Dome—in addition to using every large hall in Tinsel City—was the need for a place to showcase all these stars.

(So Tinsel City does have beautiful, decorated, flashy places like this. Fighting Boomers in the middle of the night like we do, this sight is almost unbelievable...)

Listening to the distant sound of a lively brass band, Priss stopped her bike by the lawn for a while and looked around the Jingu Dome area. A young man who had been riding his bike from the festival venue called out to her.

"Hey, I wondered who that was—it's Priss!" It was Leon.

"What? Is it okay for the AD Police to be wasting time in a place like this?"

"Well, you see, GENOM has started this unbelievable festival craze. They said if a Boomer were to go on a rampage here, it'd be a disaster, so I was assigned to security for the music festival. Thanks to that, I'm running around ragged chasing pickpockets and taking care of lost children. At this rate, dealing with Boomers is way easier."

"Lost children... That's right. You helped me that night when the Boomer attacked the hover-bus, didn't you? Did you see the girl who was with me then around here?" Priss asked about Elenndira in a casual manner.

"Oh, you mean that kid wearing overalls and a hunting cap? No, I don't know. But it's a coincidence you're looking for a lost child too, Priss. How about we grab a hamburger nearby while we look?"

"I'm in a hurry. I don't have time to take care of you."

Saying this curtly, Priss started her bike.

The promised coffee shop was in a busy location facing the Jingu Dome. The person who had suddenly called her out was the owner of the mini FM station where Linna used to be a DJ. He had arrived first and was waiting for Priss.

"I'm sorry for calling you out. After all, the building where the studio was was destroyed in that Boomer incident, so your song only got to air once. And since I forgot to insure the studio, I've been running around trying to raise funds and whatnot…"

Despite the air conditioning, the owner was frequently wiping away sweat and began talking in an unnaturally friendly tone. In short, it seemed to be an excuse for not being able to pay the recording fee because he had no money.

"N-No, that's not it. It's true I'm struggling with financing, but I wanted to consult you because… well, a story that seems like it might work out flew my way. No, I mean, it's not something that would trouble you. On the contrary, this is a rare chance for you—" The owner had an aura of someone who wouldn't move from his seat no matter what until he persuaded Priss. He rattled on as if he had pulled a plug.

"Just say it clearly. What is this 'story'?"

"Th-This is incredible, Priss! Banzai! My Priss is finally going to stand on a world-class stage! There's no doubt you'll become a big star! The world's Rock Queen, Priss!"

Leon shouted at the top of his lungs without regard for his surroundings. Priss hurriedly pulled Leon down and made him sit beside her.

"I-It's actually the case that the main producer of the World Folk Music Festival will be appearing here soon. Depending on the content of the conversation, you might be able to sing on the main stage of the Jingu Dome, alongside world-class musicians, starting tomorrow!"

It was then. A man with an imposing presence, dressed in an obviously expensive suit, and a man in his early thirties with silver hair slicked back who looked shrewd, came toward them through the tables. The FM station owner hurriedly stood up and introduced himself, bowing his head repeatedly to the two.

"You are the Priss who sang 'Epitaph of Youth,' I assume. I am Featherstone, acting as the general director at the request of the GENOM Corporation."

The silver-haired gentleman who had taken charge of the music festival shook Priss's hand with his large hand, then turned toward Leon.

"And who might this gentleman be?"

"Ah, I'm Leon. Leon McNichol. Priss's, well, her boyfriend—Oof!"

Priss's elbow dug into Leon's side.

"OWWW... ah, no, I'm a friend. I'm the leader of an AD Police patrol team providing security for the venue."

"AD Police? Why is he here?"

The man in the back narrowed his eyes sharply as if searching.

"I ran into Priss while on patrol, so... and who might you be?"

"I'm Richards, a promoter." Richards said to the owner in a blaming tone. "However, it's problematic to have someone unrelated present—"

"Richards, now, isn't it fine? If the leader of the AD Police is guarding us right nearby, I can feel at ease too. You see, I'm not worried at all, but the host, GENOM, is quite nervous because there are those plotting to obstruct the festival, so I'm under guard twenty-four hours a day. Just now, thanks to Richards' clever arrangement, we managed to shake the guards. If we have the AD Police with us, even GENOM won't be able to complain. Hahaha!" Featherstone laughed heartily.

"Um, when you say Mr. Featherstone, are you the famous producer who made a great success of the 250th American Independence Day Festival?" Leon, having relaxed the moment he was permitted to stay, asked bluntly.

"Yes, that's me. As an event I've handled, the scale of this music festival is larger than that; rather, it will be the greatest event in history. After all, the slogan is to fuse the world's cultures into one. There are so many performers I haven't even fully grasped their actual numbers yet. Since I'm handling it, I will absolutely make it a success." Featherstone spoke with total confidence.

Leon was amazed. Featherstone was a giant who dominated the world's entertainment industry. It was said that for this festival, even several top stars and famous musicians only agreed to appear because of his direct request. For that superstar to come and meet an almost unknown street rocker in Tinsel City…!

The owner, wiping away sweat, cautiously spoke up. "Um, well then, in what form will Priss be appearing? I've only heard that she'll be put on the main stage…"

"We will have Priss sing as the top act. In other words, the opening of the main stage—and the very first voice on every channel of the worldwide broadcasting network—will be Priss's singing voice."

"WH-WHAT?!"

Richards explained in a cold, businesslike tone as if reading from documents. Leon and the owner let out shouts that were close to screams.

"Hahaha, were you surprised? However, this is no joke; it is a very serious matter. No, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that whether the music festival succeeds or not depends on your answer, Priss!"

At the American 250th Festival, Featherstone had debuted a single boy. At the time, the fourteen-year-old cowboy boy who grew up deep in the mountains of Colorado caused an immediate massive boom. Featherstone had made that boy embody the American Dream. It was even said that the success of the 250th anniversary festival lay in the recruitment of that boy. The boy had now become a world-class top star and had come to host the World Folk Music Festival.

"Based on the purpose of the satellite broadcasting network—to link the world's peoples as one—I wanted the theme music of the festival to be something that all the world's peoples would listen to intently with a feeling of solemn prayer. While the selection was difficult, Richards brought in your song, Priss. Once I heard it, I was convinced there was nothing else. My intuition is never wrong. If you perform, Priss, the success of the festival is guaranteed!"

Featherstone emphasized this and presented an extraordinary amount of 40 million as the performance fee. Leon's eyes went wide as he sighed, and the owner's knees began to shake violently.

Priss, who had been listening to the talk in silence until then, muttered quietly. "That's no good. I can't accept."

At those unexpected words, not only Featherstone but Leon and the owner changed color.

"W-What are you saying, Priss! Such a huge chance—there's no way you should let it slip!" Leon said, grabbing Priss's arm firmly.

"I'm not saying I don't want to appear. It's just, I can't do that song, 'Epitaph of Youth,' without the girl who plays the bamboo flute, Elenndira. But that girl has been missing for a while now."

At Priss's explanation, Featherstone fell into deep thought with a troubled face.

"A bamboo flute… it's true that a large part of that song's charm was supported by the exotic flute sound with its strange resonance. How about it, Priss? There must have been a South American folk instrument with a similar tone. We could use a world-class musician as a substitute—"

Richards interrupted Featherstone. "No, I actually think that girl's simple playing style—though you couldn't call it highly technical—was effective. How about we extract just that flute part from the recorded digital master and play it as backing for the vocals?"

"True. It's not good for the player of an important part not to be on stage, but if we set up a substitute just for show, we can manage to fake it somehow. Alright, let's go with that."

As Featherstone started to stand up, Priss stopped him. "Wait. I have no intention of appearing unless I'm with that girl."

Featherstone looked back at Priss in surprise. "Why? A chance like this won't come twice, you know?"

"I don't want to be a star. But if people all over the world would be happy to listen to a song I do together with that girl, then I definitely want to try."

"B-But…" Richards leaned in again from beside the troubled Featherstone. "I understand. We will definitely find that girl and persuade her to appear. So, please enter rehearsals immediately. However, in the event she isn't found, we'll use the method of taking the sound from the disc…"

"I want to find her myself. If she isn't found by the time for the performance, have another singer do another song. If these conditions are no good, then it's fine to act as if this talk never happened from the start."

Priss met Richards' sharp gaze with eyes full of firm determination. A sense of extraordinary tension froze the air between the two.

(This guy… could it be—?) A certain suspicion crossed Priss's mind as she stared at Richards' face up close.

"It can't be helped. Richards, let's accept Priss's conditions. There are plenty of candidate substitutes. It might be good to try a gamble." Featherstone proposed.

Even so, for some reason, Richards obsessed over "Epitaph of Youth" and requested to use the disc as an interlude to be played during the intermission. But Priss was also adamant, declaring that if she couldn't appear because Elenndira wasn't found, she would refuse the use of the disc as well, and she wouldn't budge.

Richards and Featherstone reluctantly accepted Priss's one-sided demands in their entirety and left the coffee shop with bitter expressions. The owner, having seen them off, slumped into his chair as his tension broke and he was filled with anxiety about the uncertain future.

Leon fiercely lit into Priss about why she insisted on such a reckless thing. Priss completely ignored him and asked the owner something that had been on her mind for a while.

"Richards? Well, it seems he isn't a GENOM-related promoter. Well, since they're paying a huge sum of 40 million to an unknown singer like you, he probably gets a considerable amount of money too, but there's no one more enthusiastic. After all, in the middle of the night, before your song was even finished, he inquired at the studio."

"What? What kind of inquiry was it?"

"Naturally, the song title and the name of the singer and group. He said right then and there that he'd promote you so you could appear in the World Folk Music Festival and wanted to meet urgently. The reason no one was in the mixing room when Linna was attacked by the Boomer was that while the mixer ran out after hearing the commotion in the other rooms, I had gone to meet Richards. To think you'd speak so harshly to a person like that…"

"Didn't he ask anything else? For example, my address…"

"Ah, I might have told him. Along with the addresses of the concert houses you often appear at."

"I thought so…"

Priss hurried to a phone booth. Linna, in a leotard, appeared on the visi-phone screen. Linna, whose dream of becoming Miss DJ had come to naught, had devoted herself again to being an aerobics instructor. She didn't look discouraged at all; her ability to switch gears was the fastest among the members.

"Eh, what? What do you mean by that? Hey, Priss!" By the time Leon tried to scramble after her, Priss's bike was already racing at high speed toward the expressway.

"Y-You're appearing in the World Folk Music Festival—RE-REALLY?!"

To Linna, who was staring with wide eyes in surprise, Priss briefly explained the business. "...so that's how it is. Can you get away from work?"

"Leave it to me! I mean, if I go to the Jingu Dome, there'll be famous singers and talents from all over the world by the truckload, right? No, it's more than that. My beauty and outstanding style might catch the eye of a skilled manager or producer, and maybe I'll become a future big star—Eek, it's amazing! I'm flying over right now!"

After hanging up and returning to her bike, Priss found Leon still standing there. "How long do you plan on slacking off from work?"

"Don't say it like that. I've contacted all my fellow patrol team members in Tinsel City! I told them to look for a girl with such-and-such characteristics. After all, whether you can stand on the main stage of the Jingu Dome depends on you finding her, Priss. I'll cooperate to the max!"

"If you have that much spare time, then guard the Jingu Dome properly. The Boomers are going to be targeting it!"

Chapter 8

At that moment, the call tone of a Visi-phone broke into the conversation as if to interrupt. "Priss? It's me! Hey, hey, can you see? Behind me! Stars from all over the world are gathering here. I'm so moved my legs are shaking!" Linna said happily from the other side of the monitor, her cheeks flushed.

"More importantly, how is that matter going?" When Priss asked, Linna suddenly lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper. "Of course, it went well. Just as Priss said, the man named Richards was a Boomer. There was no reaction at all when I attached the B-chip to the back of his neck. But so far, there hasn't been any suspicious behavior. It seems the meetings will continue all night ahead of tomorrow's opening, so I'll let you know if anything happens!"

Mackie, who was listening to the call, immediately began accessing Richards. This was the third time he had accessed a Boomer. He manipulated the computer keyboard with practiced hands. "Access complete. But it looks like linking to the cyberbrain is impossible. As expected, a normal Boomer has tight security."

"Mackie, don't do anything too forceful. There's a risk the Boomer will notice. Just monitor his actions as they are," Sylia ordered Mackie, then turned to speak to Priss. "Just as you said, Richards was a Boomer."

"Right? That's why he's the one who kidnapped Elendira!"

"Calm down, Priss. It hasn't been decided yet. Let's organize the issue once more. First, with Richards being a Boomer, the possibility that a conspiracy lurks behind his promotion of your music festival appearance has grown. So, what is his objective?"

"Who knows? Surely he isn't targeting me..."

"If we reconsider the contents of the conversation at the coffee shop, I think there is something common to all the proposals Richards brought forward."

"A common point? Let's see, what was it? Using the flute part from the disc, promising to definitely find Elendira... and he also said he wanted to play the disc during the intermission." As Priss counted them off on her fingers, Sylia leaned forward. "Listen, Priss. The common point in everything is that he wants to play Elendira's performance. He has been consistently obsessed with that."

"Elendira's performance?"

"Yes. Before we consider why he is trying to do that, let's think about Elendira's flute from the beginning. The first time was when you were on the hover-bus. And then, a Boomer attacked the bus..."

"The second time was at the studio. She played during the recording."

"But that was a place sealed by soundproof walls. It's more about when it was broadcast on FM radio."

"A crazed Boomer attacked Linna then. Come to think of it, two other incidents thought to be Boomer rampages occurred nearby at the same time. ...If all of them were near radios receiving FM... I see, the cause of the Boomers' madness is the sound of Elendira's flute!"

"At least, every crazed Boomer was in a position to hear the flute. However, there is only one exception. That is Richards."

"That's right. He must have heard the song, yet he didn't go crazy. In fact, he's even been making inquiries about the song."

"The only thing we can think of is that Richards—" Sylia was interrupted mid-sentence.

"Sister, Priss! The Boomer is acting strange!" Mackie shouted loudly. Almost simultaneously, the Visi-phone began to ring. "Is that Nene? It's Linna. Right now, Richards is talking on the phone at the desk over there, but he's speaking in a low voice and hiding the monitor with his arm!"

"Yeah. We noticed something here too. Don't take your eyes off him!" Nene hung up the receiver and immediately rushed to Sylia and the others at the computer console. Nene, who peered into the monitor, almost screamed and hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand. Reflected there was a large, expressionless laborer-like man whose powerful muscle movements could be seen through his baggy, shabby clothes. Beyond him stood a woman whose entire body was burned with keloid-like scars, standing in only her underwear, and...

"Is... is that Elendira?!? How... how cruel..." A naked girl hung with her hands suspended by ropes, looking as if she were being crucified, her head drooping listlessly. When the keloid woman swung a leather belt, the girl's body jerked, and a small scream could be heard.

What was reflected on the computer monitor was a desktop-type Visi-phone. Just as Linna had said, the man in the suit was hiding the screen from surrounding eyes with his hand. Elendira appeared only as a tiny image within that screen.

"Will she still not say yes? Elendira," came a cold man's voice. This was surely Richards.

"She says she doesn't want to betray that woman Priss. I'm persuading her that the woman wants to perform on stage with her, but she won't listen. Something happened. This girl, Elendira, doesn't seem like an ordinary person."

"I see. If it comes to it, we'll force her, but keep persuading her until I get there—threaten to kill Elendira." With that, he hung up the phone.

"How despicable they are... I have to save that girl, no matter what—" Priss bit her lip. A single tear traced down her cheek.

"Richards doesn't look like he's going to leave yet. Nene, use another computer to analyze the current image. There might be a clue to the location." Without being told by Sylia, Nene was already at work. She replayed the footage of Elendira and first enlarged the Visi-phone screen to fill the computer monitor. Then, she magnified specific sections.

"That small window next to Elendira... I can see something through the gap in the curtains... Is it a tower?" Priss hurriedly peered into the monitor. "No, this is a lighthouse! It's the Memorial Lighthouse preserved at the Eighth Pier. That bastard... he was hiding right under my nose, near my garage! Nene, print it out!" As soon as the printout emerged, Priss impatiently snatched the image and dashed out of the penthouse.

At the same time, in the chairman's office on the top floor of the Genom Tower, Quincy was listening to a report from Mason.

"Regarding the female information-gathering Boomer discovered along with that body—" Mason spoke as he produced several tabloid-sized hologram photos. The charred black steel skin of the chest was exposed, and two superalloy blades protruding from the breasts were eerie. Elsewhere, she was no different from a human woman. With disheveled hair, an expression distorted by terror, and a body twisted in pain, she possessed a sensuality that provoked a man's interest more than a human woman.

"It's quite a well-made Boomer, isn't it?" Quincy took each photo, staring with a lewd gaze.

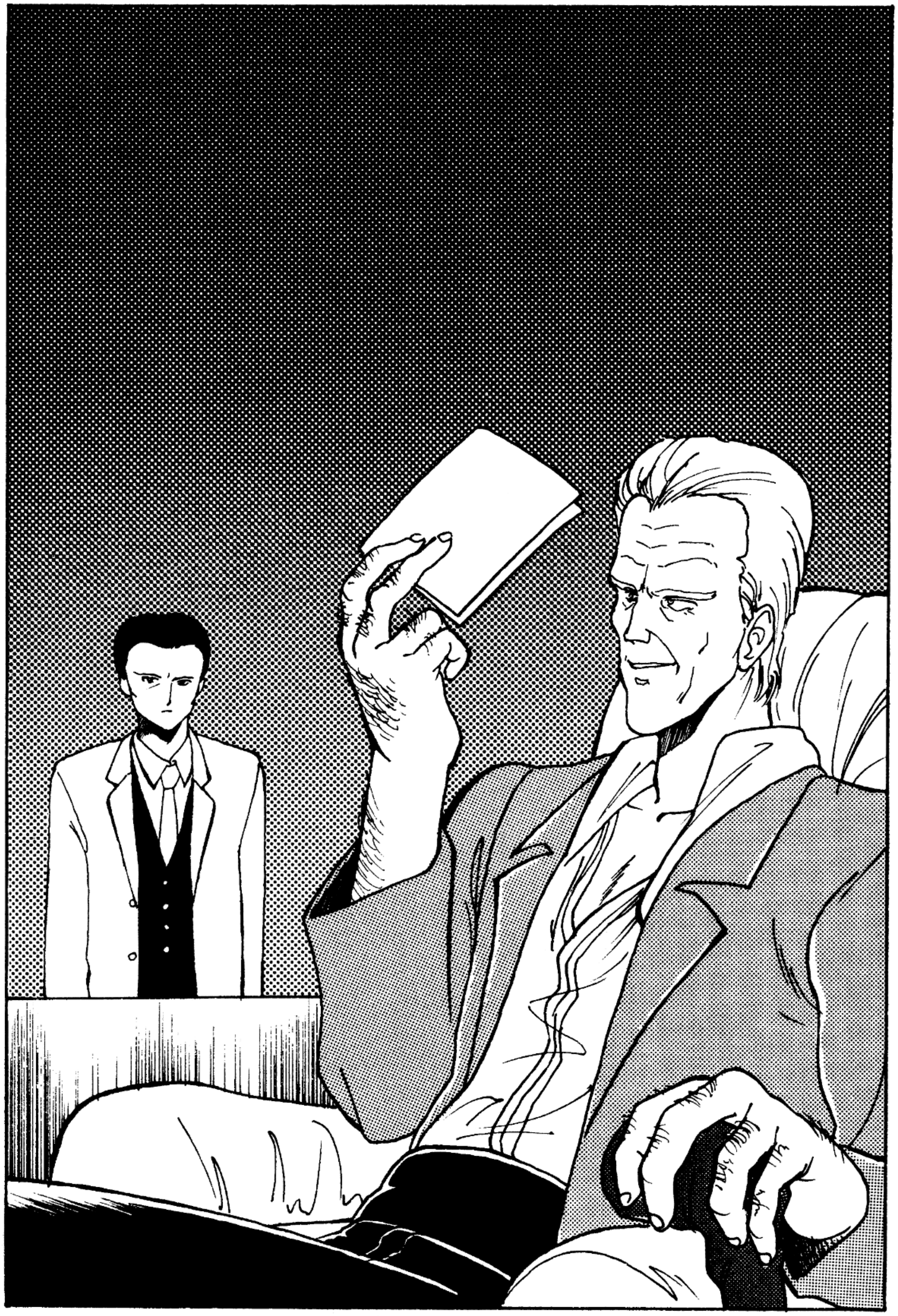
"We traced the distribution route from the parts in the heel. It is believed to be a Boomer manufactured by Brasilia Technical."

"Brasilia Technical? Does that company still exist?"

"Yes. In the weapons industry sector, they were the second-largest after our company until eight years ago, and were even called the only global corporation in South America. However, when our company began manufacturing Boomers, they declined rapidly. We thought only a factory producing self-defense handguns remained."

"Why would they suddenly build a Boomer now...? And to target the music festival. It’s useless to try and ruin our reputation at this stage."

"Information from a classified route suggests they are secretly building a factory in the Andes mountains. They also recently made a significant loan in Euro-dollars."



"A comeback? But unless a world war occurs, there is no market left for them to break into. Even if they could sabotage the World Ethnic Music Festival sponsored by us, it wouldn't damage our overwhelming credibility in production. They should have just asked to become a subsidiary instead of having such useless rivalry," Quincy said and laughed pleasantly.

"Our company cannot engage in such low-level competition. The music festival must be a success at all costs. We cannot rely on the AD Police. Reinforce the guards at the Jingu Dome with about fifty combat Boomers, Mason."

"However, Chairman... if I may say so, the Boomer that killed that female Boomer appears to be one of our own Boomers that was guarding the sub-producer."

"Ho? Then isn't that even more reassuring? It means our Boomer's performance was superior."

"No, the Boomer that did the killing is believed to be the same crazed Boomer responsible for the destruction of the fifty-story building."

"What?!"

"If the Jingu Dome is being targeted, reinforcing the Boomers might actually be dangerous."

* * *

"If the sun was hitting it from this angle earlier, it must be around here..." Priss got off her bike and began to walk, muttering to herself. It was the warehouse district of the Eighth Pier. She turned back to confirm the Memorial Lighthouse once more. "Hmph, it's this warehouse—" She stood before the old warehouse and looked up. Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through her neck. (*This is... just like that time...*) For a split second, she remembered the dawn when Elendira was kidnapped, but then Priss lost consciousness.

She was shoved with intense force, and when she came to, she was in the room she had seen on the Visi-phone. As her blurry vision gradually cleared, she saw the woman with keloid skin now wrapped in a sheet, and the sturdy laborer-like man. "You're a lucky woman to have been punched by me twice and not killed," the man muttered in a low voice. Behind him, Elendira lay wrapped in a dirty blanket with her eyes closed.

"You were the ones who kidnapped Elendira."

Ignoring her words, the man questioned Priss. "How did you find this place?"

Priss hesitated on how to answer. "It's no use searching all over Tinsel City. I thought you might be nearby, so I took a stroll around here."

The keloid woman crouched in front of her. "Is that so? I thought for sure you were a woman trying to drag Elendira into something bad, but you don't seem like such a bad person." (*That voice… I've heard it somewhere before.*)

"Who are you?"

"We are this child's parents. We came to Tinsel City from South America looking for work, but we got separated and were left penniless. So, we settled in a place like this. By the way, is this you?" The man held out a brand-new newspaper. Priss's photo was featured with the headline: *A New Star is Born from Tinsel City—Rock Queen Priss to Star in Music Festival!*

"Ah… yeah."

"If you appear in something like this, you must make a lot of money," the woman let out an affected sigh.

"Yes, that's right. Actually, that's why I've been desperately looking for Elendira. The fact that my songs were recognized enough to be invited to such a huge festival is thanks to the beauty of Elendira's flute. If we perform at the festival, we'll become world stars overnight. I want to fulfill that dream with Elendira. So, please, just until tomorrow's festival, let me take Elendira!"

"R-really? This Elendira on such a grand stage!"

"Mother, isn't this like a dream?" The man and woman hugged each other and shed tears.

"Then it's okay, right? Come on, Elendira, let's go together." As Priss said this, she tried to carry Elendira's body.

BAM. Suddenly, the door behind her opened. (*I see… these guys are planning to have me persuade Elendira. …Crap, as if I'd fall for that! But for now, I have to pretend to play along…*)

"Whoa, hold on there, Priss. Let's drop the cheesy act, shall we?" Richards entered with a cynical smile. Behind him, Linna appeared, being dragged by her arm. "Priss! Sorry, they found us out!"

"W-what—" Priss stood frozen.

"Exactly. I thought this girl had been acting strange since she came backstage at the Jingu Dome. When I caught her, she blurted it out: 'Boomer!'" Richards shoved Linna into the room. "Since you know we are Boomers, this will be quick. Who are you?"

"P-Priss," Linna looked up. Priss gave her a look that said, "Don't worry." Priss decided it was better to be honest. "Knight Sabers. You've probably heard the name, right?"

"So, you're the rumored Boomer Hunters? Apparently, you're better than the AD Police." Richards looked at Priss and Linna with interest.

"Did you come here to spy? Are you working for money? If you don't want to suffer, answer honestly." Richards slowly closed the heavy iron door.

"The incident where the AD Police failed to take out a crazed Boomer in a fifty-story building—I watched that from a nearby building. The skill and teamwork involved in snatching back the hostage... so, it was you, the Knight Sabers!" Richards grinned. "Then this will be quick. To you, Boomers are the arch-enemy. Our objective is also the eradication of Boomers."

"I know your tactics. Except for Elendira, you're all Boomers, but the number of Genom Boomers in Tinsel City is negligible. Our enemies are Genom Boomers everywhere. Why don't we join forces?"

"Weaknesses are common, right? And that weakness is the sound of Elendira's flute—" Priss said.

"So you noticed. Elendira's flute has a special waveform. To humans, it's gentle, but for Genom Boomers, it is a melody of terror. The reason I tried to get you to perform was to broadcast that flute sound across the world via satellite and inform humanity of the terror of Boomers. If we don't make people realize how dangerous they are, the buildup of Boomers will continue endlessly."

Linna finally grasped the whole story. "I see. The moment the flute sound is broadcast, those who relied on Boomers will realize the danger when they run amok. Humans who trusted machines too much will be woken up by a simple song."

"That's right. So, Priss, will you stand on stage with Elendira?" Richards approached to shake hands. Priss stood her ground. "Hmph, don't give me that smooth talk. I refuse to play the role of such a dangerous trigger. —I see, that’s why Elendira wouldn't agree even while being whipped!"

A Boomer's iron fist flew past Priss's head. Carrying Elendira, Priss fled to Linna's side. "W-what are we going to do, Priss? Without our hard suits... we're doomed..." Linna said.

At that moment, the laborer-like man's body began to swell. His clothes tore apart, and a steel body appeared. "Richards! Kill these brats along with Elendira. We have the master disc. Show them the terror of the combat Boomers from Brasilia Technical!"

"Richards!" The keloid woman removed the sheet. Her limbs were covered in nauseating burns.

"Right, Maria. Let's finish them." Richards took a step forward. Suddenly, Richards' leg gave way. "W-what is this?! No way..." Richards screamed a unique Boomer scream.

CRASH! A small window shattered. Following that, the steel door flew open.

"The Knight Sabers are here to deliver justice from the shadows!"

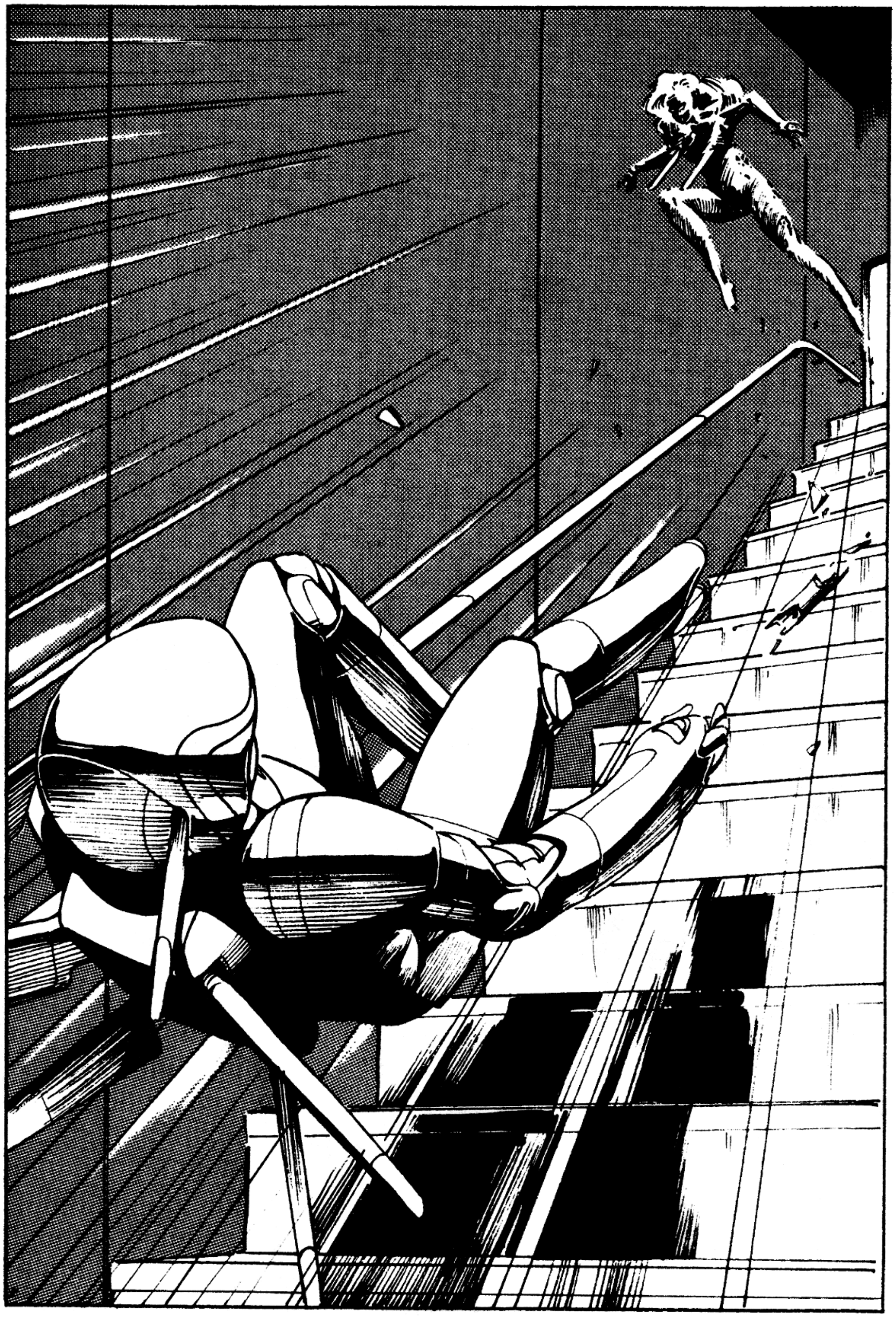
"Sylia, you came!" Linna cried out. Immediately, Garcia lunged at Sylia. Sylia's knee gave way and sank into the floor. Linna screamed.

At the moment it looked like Sylia would be crushed, the Boomer's massive body flew through the air and smashed through the wall.

"You two, take Elendira and run!" Sylia shouted, then jumped through the hole in the wall. Nene was fighting the female Boomer with her laser barrel.

"I see, she got those keloids from that fire."

"Priss, run, fast!" Nene shouted. Nene's body spun and rolled out the door. The stairs were right there. Nene fell. The Boomer jumped after her. "Nene!"



Priss tried to run, but Richards stood in her way. Priss grabbed whatever was nearby.

CRACK. Priss swung a thick leather belt. "Priss, that won't work!" Linna shouted.

Below the stairs, Nene was pinned under the female Boomer. The Boomer got up, impaled on Nene's blades. Three pairs of protrusions on Nene's suit reacted. *Beep.* Nene's body moved away and spun in the air.

Richards began to retreat. "Grrraaaaah!" Richards landed with a thud. "Kyah! Wasn't that a close one!"

"Linna, now!" Priss shouted. Priss and Linna tackled Richards, and he fell headlong down the stairs.

There, they saw the two Boomers tangled together. Richards was impaled by the female Boomer's blades.

"Quick! The Boomer is going to explode!" Hot smoke began to blow out. Just as they were about to leap out, a massive explosion occurred.

"Is everyone okay?!" Mackie ran over. "Surprised Richards went crazy?"

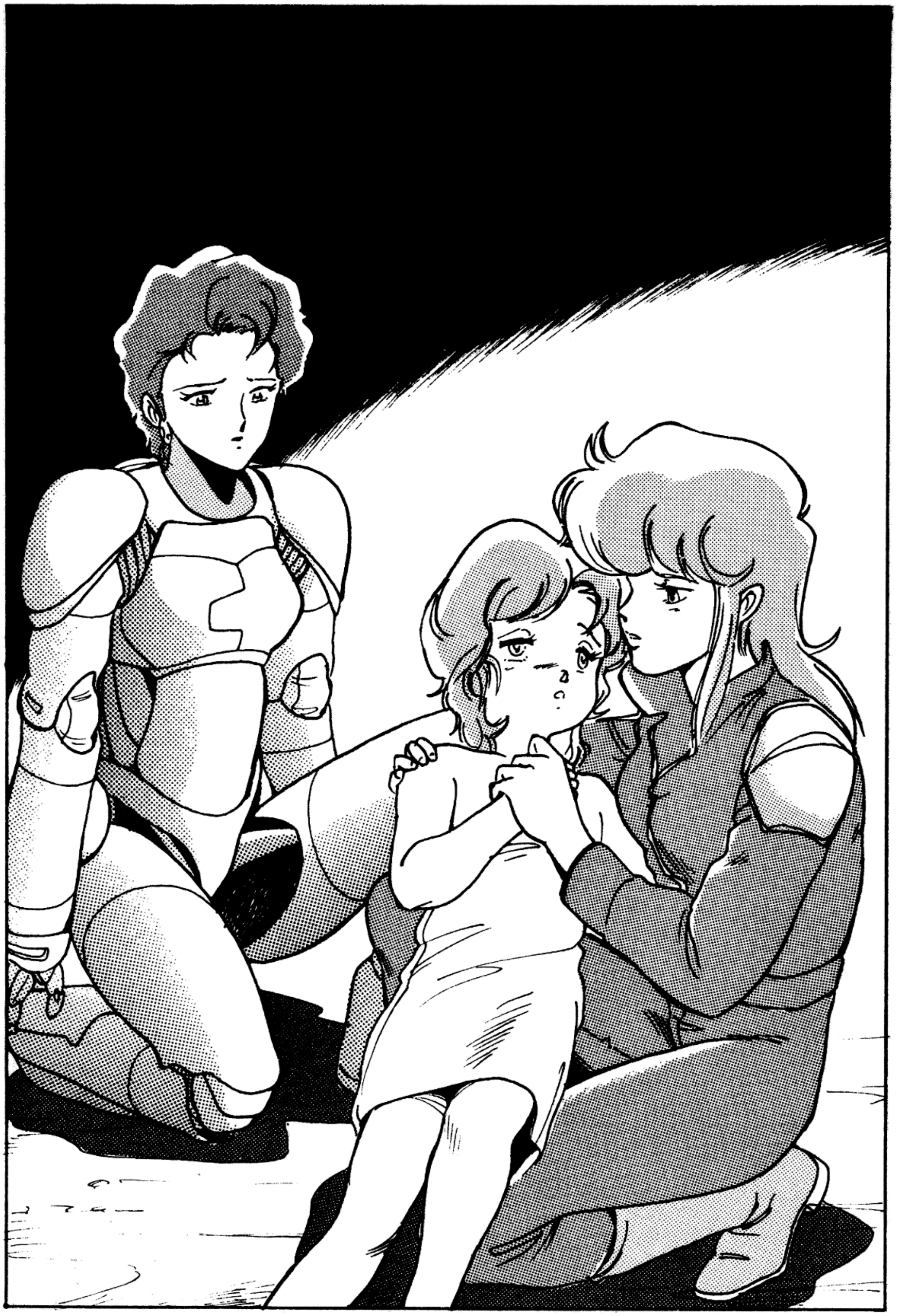
"Was that your doing?" Linna asked.

"Mackie used a signal to bypass the filter in the cyberbrain," Sylia explained. "The combat Boomer fell and was destroyed."

"Where's Elendira?" Everyone turned back. Elendira was crouched a distance away. Priss ran to help her up.

"Elendira, hang in there!"

"Miss Priss... it was scary... but I'm not going to go crazy anymore. Tinsel City is a city of memories for me."



"Where did you come from?" asked Sylia.

"Brasilia. But Papa was from Tinsel City. He hated Genom. I came to get revenge."

"Your papa worked at Wiz Laboratory, didn't he?" Sylia said.

"Elendira, pull yourself together!" Priss shook her. "Blood..." Priss's hand was covered in blood. Elendira opened her eyes slightly. "Don't talk. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"One more... important thing. Genom is trying to do something even scarier. There's only a little time left..."

The Genom conspiracy was this: Genom's widely announced broadcast satellite network was a "peace offensive" masking a plan for war expansion. The satellites possessed laser cannons targeted at beam orbital satellites. By neutralizing the satellites that monitored the world, Genom—the world's number one weapons manufacturer—would profit endlessly from an ensuing arms race.

"The Boomers said they were from Brasilia Technical. They feared Genom's monopoly," Priss muttered.

"Yes. Genom's method is clever. They use the festival for a peaceful image while making their satellites indispensable," Sylia said.

Elendira opened her eyes again. "Miss Priss... Knight Sabers... my last request. Please don't let South America get involved in war..."

Strength left the girl's body completely. Linna cried out.

"What a horrible thing! To think that such a cute girl, not even of age, was holding the fate of the entire world in her hands. And on top of that, she was forced to make such a terrifying choice where people would be sacrificed no matter which path she took. Hey, Sylia, there's nothing more cruel than this, is there? This is just too much!"

Priss lifted her face. Although she was pale, there were no tears in her eyes.

"Elendira sacrificed her own life to save people from the crisis of crazed Boomers running amok across the globe. And in the end, she saved me... I was carrying this girl on my back. Elendira died in my place. Linna, one of those choices you mentioned is gone now. It’s our job to crush the other half of this crisis!!"

Sylia looked straight into Priss's eyes and gave a silent nod.

Epilogue

"Heh, look at them. High-and-mighty stars, acting all refined. They only feel safe because guys like us are protecting them. And then what? The damn pig tells me to get lost! Fine, I'm going! Don't come crying to me when a Boomer attacks you, because I won't help. Idiots!"

Leon spat out curses as he emerged from the row of dressing rooms. He had only tried to join a conversation between a French girl, who had debuted as a prodigy in a video movie years ago, and a young American musical actress. Instead, the French girl had slapped his cheek with all her might, and the American actress had snarled, "Beat it, pig!"

(I don't care about those two! Priss is the one. All the popularity belongs to her anyway. She doesn't treat me like dirt. She's a truly pleasant girl!)

As he stepped into the corridor and turned back to glare at the dressing rooms one last time, Leon jumped in surprise to see the very girl he had been imagining standing right there. What's more, while he had been picturing a gentle smile out of pure wishful thinking, that exact smile was there before him, perfect down to the last millimeter.

"P-Priss! So coming to the Jingu Dome means you decided to perform after all!"

"Well, I wonder. I'm still undecided. I wandered over here thinking I'd make up my mind, but then I realized… there isn't anyone here who would actually listen to my problems and give me sincere advice," Priss said in an unusually sweet, sugary voice.

The moment he heard that, Leon put his arm around her shoulder like a boyfriend and led her to a bench on an outdoor stage where almost no one was around. "No one but guards come here. You can speak your heart safely," Leon whispered, putting on his best act.

"Hey, can I ask you something? Genom sent new guards today, right? Are any of them here, looking over this stage?" Despite having her arm wrapped around Leon's neck and a dreamy look in her eyes, Priss asked a very strange question.

"Huh? Sure, there are. Counting the area around the Dome, they pushed thirty of them on us. Look, that guy standing over there is one of them."

"I see. Maybe… no, he might be a Boomer. I'm sure of it. One of those crazed Boomers that's been causing trouble in Tinsel City lately…"

"Is that so? He looks normal to me though."

"Looking at your face, my worries just flew away!" Priss suddenly stood up and started running.

"W-Wait! Hey!" Leon scrambled to follow. Then, for reasons known only to her, Priss pulled down the zipper of her leather jumpsuit—which she wore nothing under—all the way to her navel, exposing one shoulder.

"Help! That man… that man suddenly attacked me!" Priss pointed at Leon while running straight toward the Genom guard.

Three or four guards immediately surrounded Leon, pointing their guns at him.

"S-Stop! I'm Leon from the AD Police! I'm not suspicious!" Leon stomped his feet and shouted.

"Oh, were you AD Police? I guess I was mistaken. It's nothing. Well then, I'm Priss, the one singing first at tomorrow's festival. Please let that man go. Goodnight~" Priss said in a bright voice and vanished into the night darkness.

"Priss must be really nervous… she's completely snapped…" Leon stared at where she had disappeared with a look of utter disbelief.

Priss sped down the midnight super-expressway. Back at the penthouse, a tense, extraordinary atmosphere prevailed.

"Phase one of the operation is complete," Priss reported, walking quickly toward Sylia.

"And the 'Target'?"

"It's a fresh one, just sent by Genom to the Jingu Dome. No worries about him leaving his post."

Sylia looked straight at Priss and gave a deep, single nod. "Excellent. Genom must be frantically investigating the series of Boomer rampages. They'll have checked the newly dispatched Boomers meticulously. That will force them to believe our words."

"But, my job should be done now. I can go with you, right?" It was Priss who said this, still standing.

"Then, you really don't intend to open the World Ethnic Music Festival?" Sylia asked to confirm her feelings.

"That's right, Priss. Our operation isn't about destroying the music festival itself. Even if the person who set up your appearance was a Brasilia Technical spy-Boomer, it was your own talent that the main producer recognized. Don't be stubborn—you won't get a chance like this twice," Linna tried hard to persuade her.

"It wasn't just my strength. Without Elendira, it doesn't have half the charm. No, that song only had charm because I did it with that girl. But for Elendira, that was a way to confirm our bond. There was never a need for others to hear it. Broadcasting it on a program was the mistake in the first place. I've finally realized that."

Tears shimmered slightly in Priss's eyes as she fell silent. A heavy silence descended on the penthouse.

"I understand your feelings, Priss. But our feelings for Elendira are the same. We want to honor her will by fulfilling our respective roles. You understand that, right?"

All eyes watching Priss expressed agreement with Sylia's words.

"I guess I'm being too sentimental..." Priss let out a breath and a small smile touched the corner of her lips. "I won't go on stage. But I'll act as planned. I'll watch and see if the Jingu Dome operation goes well. Either way, this operation is a big gamble. I'm praying for its success."

The night before the festival passed quietly. By the time the morning sun began to hit the curtains, the shadows in the room were gone. Mackie's faint, regular breathing as he napped on the sofa was the only sound.

It was the next day. The chairman's office at the top of Genom Tower. Morning light slashed across the glass wall.

"You mean to let them—into this room?" Quincy stood at the boundary between light and shadow.

"Listen, Mason. I have only allowed the President of the United States to visit here once." Quincy sat back, closing his eyes.

The door opened, and three sets of footsteps entered. "These are the two who call themselves the Knight Sabers, Chairman," Mason announced.

Quincy opened his eyes, which then went wide. "W-What is the meaning of this?! Mason, why did you let them through like this!" Quincy raised his voice. Standing before him was a pair.

"Please forgive the intrusion. We are only the Knight Sabers when we are in this form—fully armed in our battle suits. We considered it the same as you, Chairman, being protected by numerous security measures on the top floor of this magnificent building."

The figure who stepped forward greeted him with a gesture so graceful it was hard to believe she was wearing a battle suit.

"A woman...? No, excuse me. But isn't that outfit a bit... excessive for visiting someone's home?" Quincy quickly regained his composure and stared at the battle suit with interest.

"I don't believe so. We came here today to ask a favor. If you refuse, we intend to resort to blackmail, so this outfit shouldn't be out of place."

"Blackmail? How unpleasant. I heard there was an introduction from the USSD, a request that I must meet with you. What is it you want from me?"

"We want you to immediately scrap the broadcast satellites Genom launched."

"Hah? What did you just say? Surely you aren't serious. As you know, starting at noon today with the World Ethnic Music Festival, the broadcasting that has been our company's long-cherished wish to contribute to human welfare begins. I cannot entertain such a request, even as a joke. But since we've met, tell me the reason why you want them scrapped."

"It wouldn't matter if we told you. We have no hard evidence."

"That's a strange story. To ask for disposal without clear grounds—" Quincy gave a small, cynical smile. Mason stared at the two silently.

The second battle-suited figure, who had been quiet, stepped forward. "Umm, we don't have much time, so let's move to the blackmail. Currently, four USSD patrol shuttles are flying toward four of your broadcast satellites. Oh, maybe they're already waiting in space? Anyway, when a certain incident occurs at the Jingu Dome in five minutes, it will prove that what we told the USSD Director a few hours ago wasn't a lie. Then, they'll board your satellites and start an investigation. ...How's that for a start?" she asked the other.

"Yes, that's fine. Now, could you tune that magnificent monitor on the wall to the live feed from the Jingu Dome?"

Quincy stood up in a rage. "Wait! What do you mean, USSD investigating our satellites? Even in space, boarding someone else's property without permission is trespassing!"

"Well, don't tell us. It's the USSD doing it. But if they find something 'nasty' during the investigation, won't you be facing charges far worse than trespassing? I believe when the abolition of the 20th-century SDI—Star Wars—was signed, there was an agreement not to take weapons into space. Though USSD was granted exceptions by UN consensus."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Quincy looked away with a sullen expression and tapped the desk irritably.

"In any case, why don't we watch the Jingu Dome?" the other figure said.

At the Jingu Dome, a man of massive build was walking slowly through the silver reflection of the bio-synthetic resin roof, looking left and right. He tapped his left palm rhythmically with a black stick held in his right hand.

If someone had been tracking his movements with a stopwatch, they would have seen a monotonous, repeating cycle of exactly 0.8 seconds. This man had already memorized the gender, estimated age, height, build, face, and clothing of over 15,000 people who came within five meters of him in the last two hours.

The man's name was Robertson. One of the security personnel sent by Genom—in reality, he was a Boomer, a C-series combat model.

Robertson was momentarily forced to break his camouflage pattern by a crowd in front of an ice cream stall. This freed up a small amount of capacity in his cyberbrain. Automatically, another behavior pattern was inserted: "Random Thought."

(Why do humans gather in such crowded places and wait in long lines just to buy a clump of cream that's about to melt? They make a fuss about minor differences in artificial coloring and sweeteners. Humans are truly foolish, they have such nonsensical ways of thinking. Even this 'Music Festival.' Some music has logical structure, but even then, why listen to it in such poor conditions when you could use a computer-controlled playback system? It's completely insane...)

While Robertson was thinking this, a figure approached from behind and tapped his shoulder. Robertson stopped his random thoughts and spun around.

"You look like you couldn't care less about the music festival, eh?" said a young man in a casual style—leather jacket, T-shirt, and washed-out jeans.

Robertson's cyberbrain identified him immediately: Leon McNichol, leader of the AD Police patrol team.

"No, that's not it. I'm just a little tired..."

"Ohoho, you didn't look like that to me." Leon teased without changing his expression. Robertson, unable to judge if it was a joke, triggered a suspicion program. Leon put his arm around Robertson's shoulder.

"Hey, you remember last night, right? That girl Priss, who's supposed to sing first on stage today... she clung to you, didn't she?"

The memory was there. "At that time, she'd unzipped her jumpsuit and one of her breasts was popping out. You touched it, didn't you?"

"Hah?" Robertson failed to judge the intent of the question.

"I'm not blaming you. I just want to know how it felt. Even though I'm her boyfriend, she hasn't let me touch her yet. So, how was it? Was it soft, or did it have a bounce?"

"There was an overall presence of adipose tissue with a protruding apex. They were normal breasts for that age, and no abnormalities were detected." Robertson answered seriously, still not understanding why Leon wanted to know.

"Tch, that's not what I was asking. Whatever. At least you didn't try to grope her." Leon glared at Robertson and released him.

Robertson began walking again. He moved to a spot of artificial grass between the outdoor stage and the Jingu Dome where people were sparse.

(Wait… what is this sound?)

Suddenly, a slow melody flowed into Robertson’s hearing. A trio of piano, bass, and maracas. The music itself wasn't strange, but he couldn't identify the direction or distance. It felt as if the sound were playing *inside* his head.

Then a voice sang:

"We, whom time has forgotten, lost children racing down the freeway… what are we rushing to catch up to…"

At that moment, a strange sound pierced Robertson’s cyberbrain like a thunderclap. "W-What is this… what is happening!"

Images began to surge into his brain like a tsunami. Data split apart, combined with unrelated info, and flowed backward. The reflections from the Dome's roof turned into a thousand blades. The grass beneath him shook; he felt he was falling into the abyss of space at light speed.

"GWAO-TROUBLE-WAAAGH-GEEEEEEEEEE—!!"

Robertson clutched his head and screamed. He desperately tried to apply order to his sensory systems, trying to judge it as a simple malfunction.

(Almost there… soon the self-repair function will—)

"You bastard, you ARE a Boomer! I thought your reaction was weird earlier, but Priss was right!" Leon’s voice thundered above him. Robertson snapped his head up. The chaotic images were gone. He was back at the Jingu Dome, but his eyes…

As soon as his perception reconstructed itself around the object thrust before him, an amorphous, strangely hideous sensation welled up from deep within Robertson himself.

Leon stood straddling Robertson as he lay on the grass, his railgun aimed precisely between the Boomer's eyes.

(*The muzzle of a railgun… fire… smoke… bullets… impact!*)

Robertson’s cyberbrain churned out associations one after another. However, these were not for the purpose of refining a meticulous counter-attack strategy.

(*…Destruction… death… ruin! I—me—!*)

The counter-question issued by his judgment-correction program—*Why are you thinking such things?*—was utterly useless. It was because something hidden deep within the cyberbrain, stimulated by the sound from moments ago, had begun to function beyond its normal role.

The fifth- and sixth-generation computers that appeared at the end of the 20th century had indeed progressed to the point of simulating human thought patterns and reactions. However, that alone was not enough to be complete—at the very least, they could not be called "living things." This was the greatest challenge of the Cyberdroid Project, which sought to create beings infinitely close to humans.

There was something that even the lowest forms of biological life possessed, yet which never existed in a machine—that was the **"impulse."** The "drive," or the power that compels one to action from within. Furthermore, when it came to animals, they possessed consciousness on top of that. More specifically, they possessed a conscious *subjectivity*.

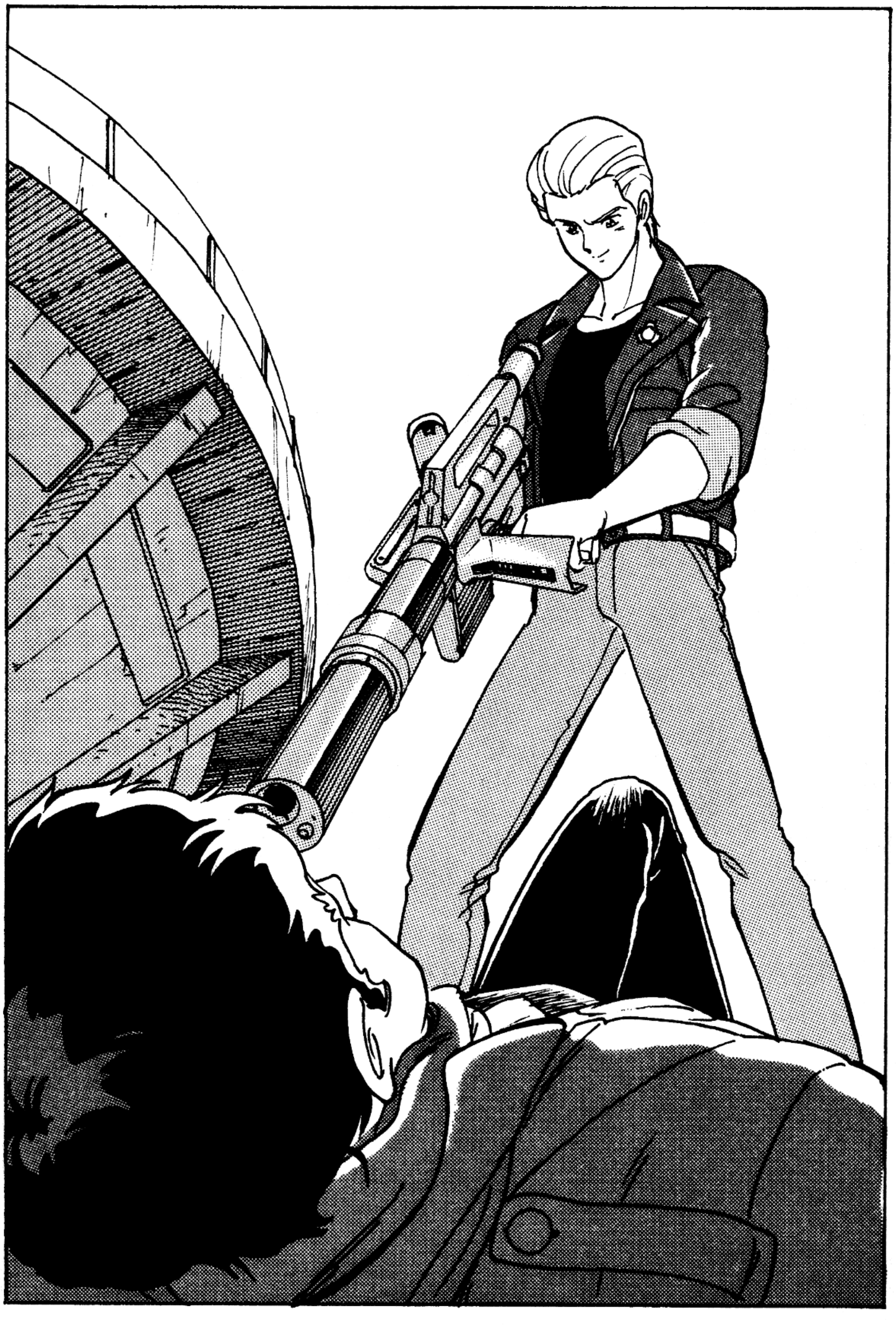
Subjectivity is the basis for realizing that one is oneself, a replaceable existence distinct from all others. It is the basis for being conscious that "I am here, now," amidst the endless continuation of the "now" and the expanse of elusive space—in other words, the **"Ego."**

Affection, hatred, desire, contempt—all these emotions could be simulated as forms of relational patterns. However, this "Ego" alone could not be quantified as data. This was because it could not be divided into any further units; there was nothing that existed behind it.

Yet, it was impossible to create a Boomer without this "Ego." To recognize an "enemy" is to identify a "something" that is distinct from "oneself" and, moreover, intends to cause harm to "oneself." And one must possess the will—the "drive"—to destroy that enemy.

Researchers, driven by the passion to create sub-human cyberdroids, applied the cutting edge of biotechnology and finally succeeded in creating a mass of cells that lived solely as the **"Core"** of the Ego.

This "Core" was embedded deep within the Boomer's cyberbrain, continuing to function as the basis for every judgment the Boomer made.



It was no longer a strategy calculated by Robertson’s computer. It was a command that could never be resisted—a scream of existence from within.

“Run, run from the humans, they’ll kill you, they’ll kill you!”

Robertson was afraid. He feared being destroyed, being recorded as a mere combat log, and being erased. However, that sense of fear was not a simulated emotion, nor was it a cry based on mimetic behavior. It pierced through Robertson’s entire soul, binding him fast. It was "Fear" itself, now surpassing mere apprehension; no, it was something that exceeded even fear.

Beyond the railgun were Leon’s eyes, burning with hatred. “Die!”—those eyes screamed the word.

Before he knew it, a human wall had formed, surrounding Robertson from a distance. Those eyes… eyes… eyes…

“It’s a murderer Boomer!” “I-I’m scared!” “Enemy of humanity!” “Destroy the Boomer!” “Kill the Boomer!” “Kill him!” “Kill him!”

Robertson realized that everyone was his enemy. The "Ego" of Robertson was now clearly terrified by the immense power of the enemy's consciousness—their hatred and fear. Something—yes, the thing awakened by the power of that strange sound—felt a crisis of existence and trembled.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!”

The thing welling up from inside burst forth as a scream from Robertson’s mouth. Then, pushing through a part of the swaying, agitated crowd, Robertson began to run desperately.

The next moment he saw a gate at the Jingu Dome standing dimly open, Robertson charged toward it, seeking an escape route from the crisis of his existence. He lunged through the human wall and into the gate.

Following the instructions of the battle-suited figure, Mason unhesitatingly picked up a remote from the desk and pressed a switch toward the wall. A large image flickered onto the black wall, while simultaneously, the brightness-adjusting glass of the windows turned slightly blue, making the image clearer.

The large monitor displayed an outdoor stage specially set up adjacent to the Jingu Dome. Amidst a mountain of people, a female reporter was holding out a microphone to two figures: a dignified, silver-haired middle-aged man and a blond youth in his early twenties.

“…and so I believe. After all, it's produced by Mr. Featherstone, the man who made the 250th American Independence Anniversary eight years ago such a grand success and turned me into a star, so there's no doubt about it.”

The young man gave a V-sign to the audience and turned back toward the camera as a storm of applause filled the venue.

“We have been speaking with Mr. Featherstone and Jack Rawdie about the World Ethnic Music Festival, which is finally only three hours away. Now, next—”

The female reporter’s voice was drowned out by the roar of the crowd. She looked around in a panic. “…Has one of the big stars entered? The venue is in an uproar. We are currently checking, but with such a major event, people from all over the world—”

The commotion grew louder, and even through the screen, the extraordinary atmosphere was palpable. Spectators were rushing onto the stage, running past the reporter. The audio turned into the sound of countless running footsteps and distant screams.

The image cut away. The entire interior of the massive Jingu Dome was now visible. Staff were fleeing through the aisles. On the lavishly decorated stage, performers in ethnic attire were running in all directions. And there, almost in the center of the arena, was a single, burly black shadow systematically destroying the plush VIP sofas.

“…Is that certain? I see. Then suppress it immediately. Don’t let it touch a single hair on a spectator!” Mason gave sharp orders into the receiver. “Chairman, it seems the Boomer causing the disturbance is one of the new guards that I dispatched to the Jingu Dome yesterday.”

Quincy spun around at the report. “W-What did you say?!”

“Furthermore, they say he suddenly began rampaging as if he’d gone mad. There seem to be no abnormalities in the other guards, but the two who tried to restrain him were taken down.”

“That… that's impossible. Surely, it wasn't you—” Quincy turned his face, glistening with greasy sweat, toward the pair in battle suits.

“Oh, if you're asking if it was our doing, we can only answer ‘No.’ However, this is what we wanted you to see.” One of the battle-suited figures said, pointing at the rampaging Boomer. “If you consider this series of incidents, you'll understand our earlier point about scrapping the broadcast satellites.”

“As I reported yesterday, the Boomer who went mad along the Sumida River was one of my men,” Mason said calmly. “If someone’s handiwork can cause rampages across a wide area, it must be due to radio or sound waves. If those waves are broadcast worldwide, every Boomer who hears it will go mad. By the time we prove it, it will be too late.”

“Can we trade the existence of the broadcast network for this?” Quincy asked.

“If Genom’s own broadcast causes Genom-made Boomers to go mad globally, the public will turn on us. The venue is already in that state…” Mason looked up at the 200-inch monitor. The Boomer had just exploded in front of the venue entrance. AD Police in heavy gear surrounded the smoke, while a single young officer in civilian clothes waved his railgun to the cheering crowd.

“Look at this. The news only says the broadcast is ‘temporarily postponed.’ It doesn't say if the laser weapons were disposed of!” Nene said, crawling over newspapers on the floor.

“But look,” Linna added, “it says ‘USSD launches 30 shuttles for emergency drills.’ That’s the exact number of Genom’s satellites. Either way, it’s settled. Right, Sylia?”

“Yes,” Sylia said with a smile. “Genom accepted the disposal of the cannons and the cancellation of the festival on the condition that the broadcast functions remain untouched and the lasers are not made public. But would Genom really perform ‘charity’ broadcasting without sponsors?”

“Probably not,” Mackie added. “If someone slipped Priss’s song into the list, Genom’s reputation would be destroyed in one shot.”

“Idiot!” Nene snapped. “If Genom found out that song caused the madness, Priss would be in danger!”

“O-Oh, right… but Sis, didn't you send the data to the AD Police? Won't the secret leak from there?” Mackie asked.

Sylia answered calmly. “That part is fine. I edited the data. But there is one thing that concerns me…”

“What is it, Sylia?” Linna's face went pale.

“The AD Police requested strategic data on combat Boomers. But amidst the chaos, I realized I didn't have a single piece of info on a *normal* combat Boomer during battle. Plus, I removed quite a bit of sensitive data…”

Sylia took out a card calculator. “The penalty for breach of contract is this much… and expenses were high… so, the total is—”

“WHAAAT? That’s all!?” Linna’s scream echoed through the penthouse.

The day the music festival was supposed to happen was coming to a close. Priss stood on the Riverfront Bridge, her hair fluttering in the wind. The sky was a garish orange, like a rotting mandarin.

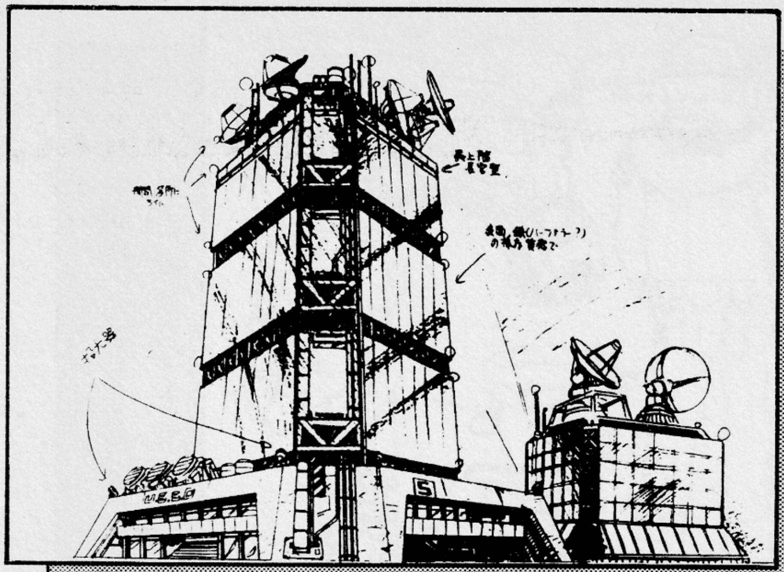
(The fire at that hotel… the sunset looked just this filthy then. Elendira’s submarine must have passed right under this bridge at that exact moment. It was the first place she touched her father’s homeland…)

Priss stared at the golden sea. “Happiness Supreme… I’m sending these words to you all who lived your best in Tinsel City, and to you, Elendira.”

She threw the bouquet with all her might toward the sun. Weighted by her master recording disk, it sank quickly into the water. She looked at the rusted, broken guardrails of the bridge.

(I guess that 'game' isn't popular anymore. I don't know if that's good or bad… but the faces of the comrades who died are etched in my heart.)

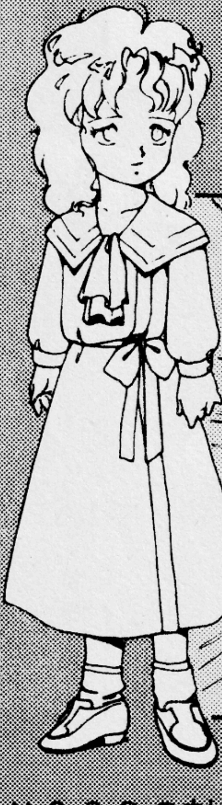
"Happiness Supreme"—words shared only among friends, with no guarantee, but they remained.

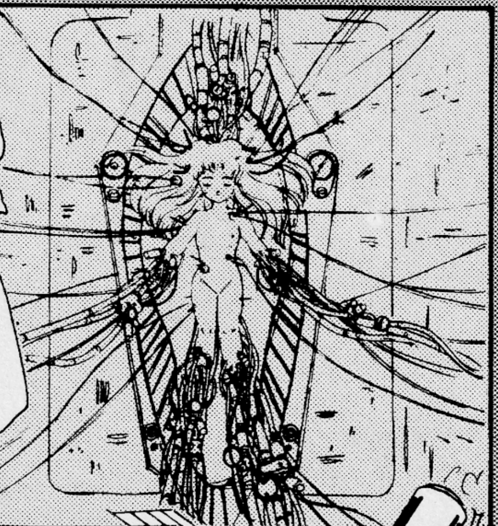


◀ＵＳＳＤビル

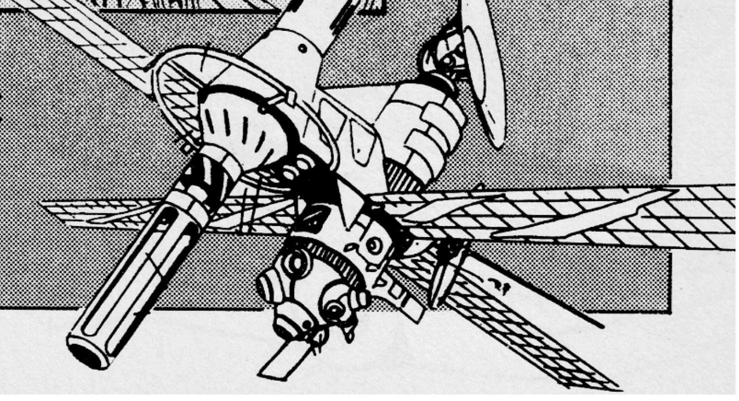
ＵＳＳＤ（宇宙防空軍）は宇宙開発の影の部分を支える。ゲノムと同様に多くの謎を秘めている。

U.S.S.D





◀シンシア（左）少女の姿をしているが実はビーム衛星の“歩く標的”なのである。ゲノムが奪取を企む程の高性能ブーマ。



▶ＵＳＳＤの対地上攻撃用ビーム衛星。シンシアと同調することにより作動する。

U.S.S.D. (United Space Defense Force)
The U.S.S.D. supports the darker side of space development. Like Genom, it holds many secrets.

Cynthia (Left): Although she has the appearance of a young girl, she is actually the "walking target" for a beam satellite. She is a high-performance Boomer, so powerful that Genom schemes to seize her.

▲ USSD Surface-to-Air Attack Beam Satellite: It functions by synchronizing with Cynthia.

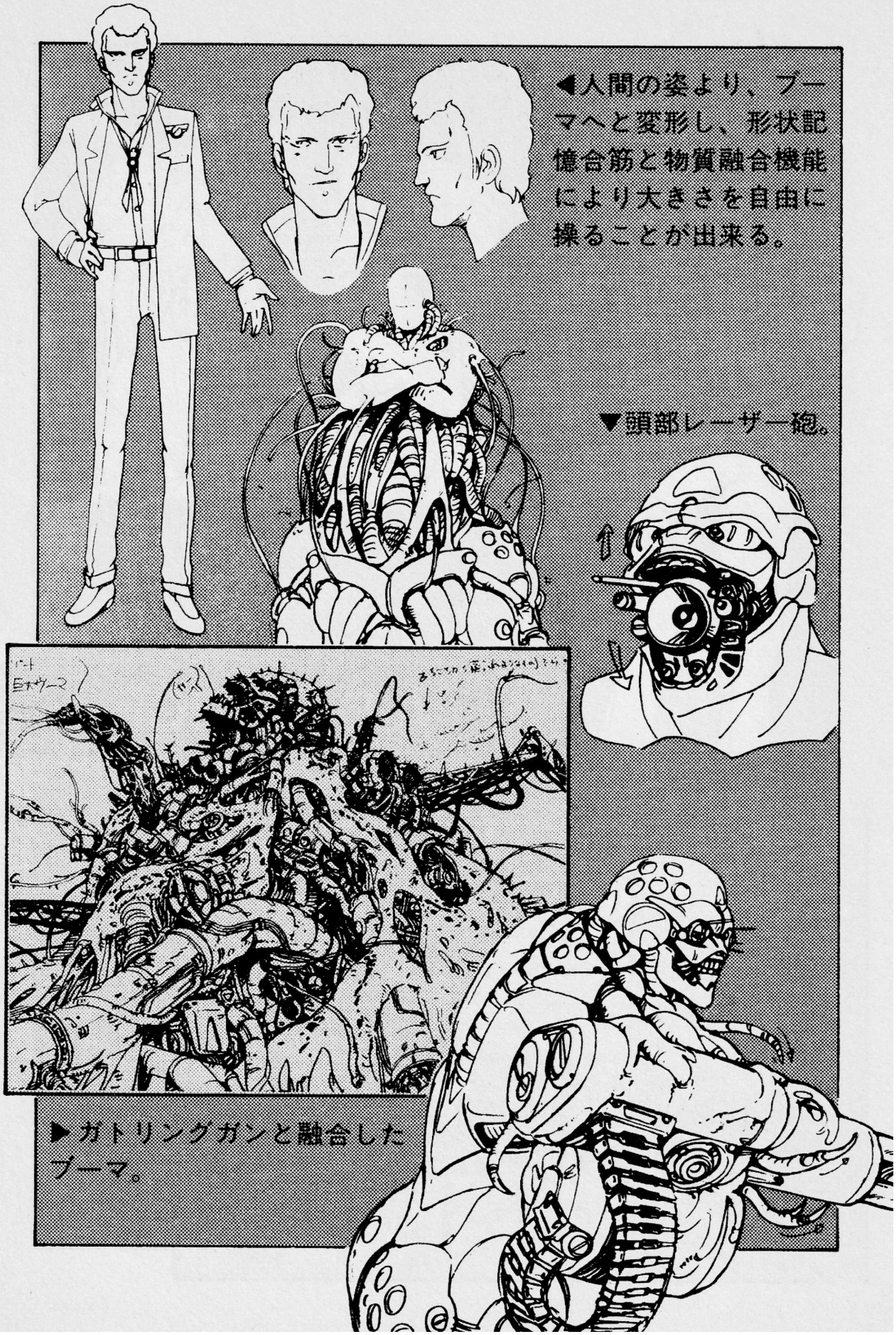
-

AD Police (ADP) Equipment & Profiles

- **ID Plates:** The numbers are different for each individual.
- **Armored Version:** There is also equipment on the opposite side (near the armpit).
- **Helmet Detail:** This helmet is not perfectly round; it has a shape that is double-faceted (front and back). Drawing it slightly larger looks like this [referring to the sketch].
- **ADP Officer:** Weapons change depending on the mission; this is the basic style.
- **AD Police Logo:** (Includes the "ADP" emblem and "AD POLICE" lettering).

Vehicles & Weaponry

- **◆ "Fire Bee":** A small helicopter for anti-Boomer combat.
- **< ADP Transport Truck:** [Label for the support vehicle]
- **▼ Leon's Patrol Car "Road Chaser":** [Label for his custom vehicle]
- **▼ Assault Rifle for General Officers:** [Label for the standard-issue firearm]



パート
巨大ブーマ
(ツメ)

◀人間の姿より、ブーマへと変形し、形状記憶合筋と物質融合機能により大きさを自由に操ることが出来る。

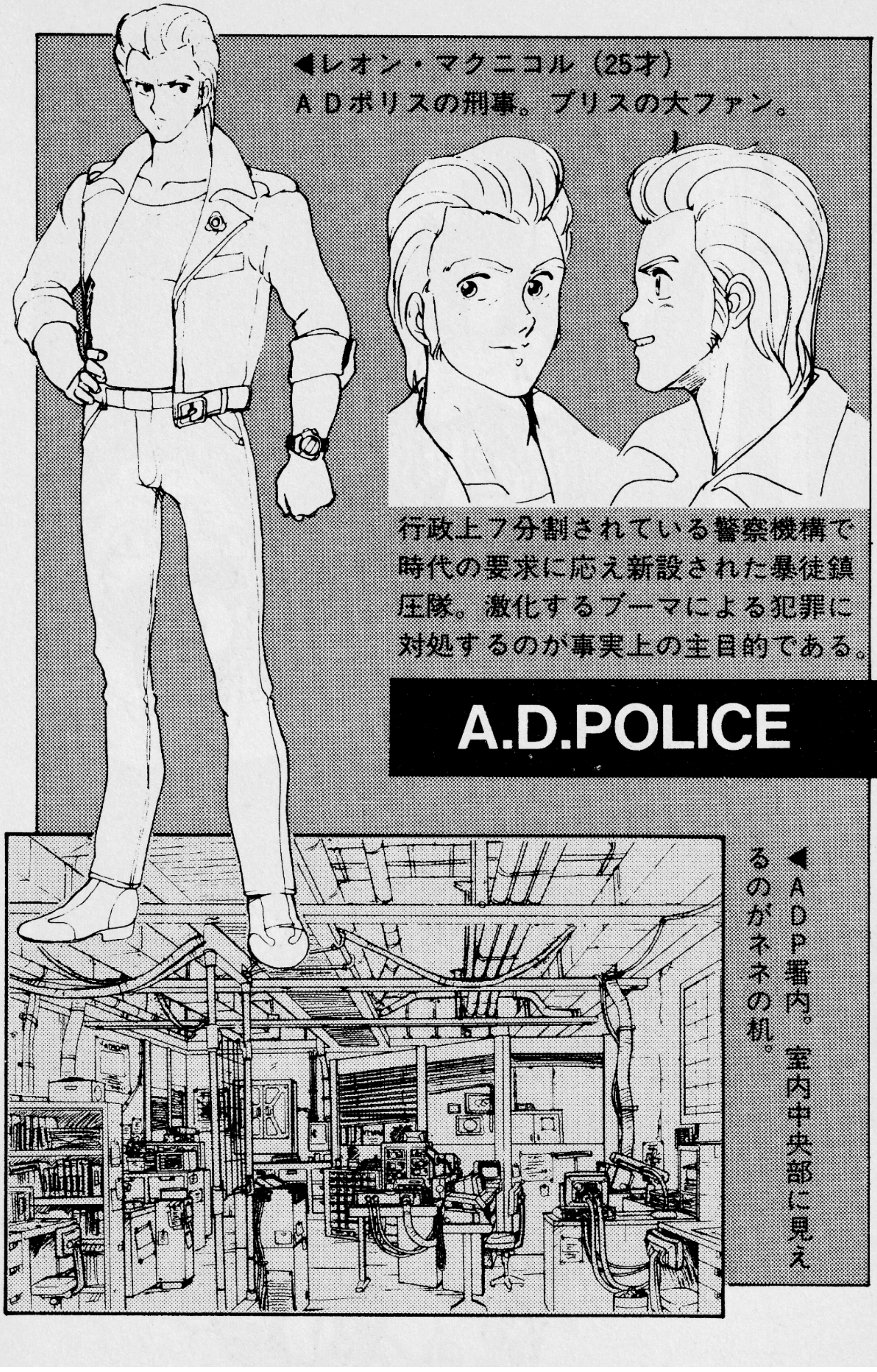
▼頭部レーザー砲。

▶ガトリングガンと融合したブーマ。

Giant Boomer

- ▲ A Boomer integrated with a Gatling gun.
- It transforms from a human form into its Boomer state. By utilizing shape-memory alloys and matter-fusion capabilities, it is able to freely manipulate its size.
- ▼ Head-mounted laser cannon.

A.D.POLICE



◀レオン・マクニコル（25才）
ＡＤポリスの刑事。プリスの大ファン。

行政上７分割されている警察機構で時代の要求に応え新設された暴徒鎮圧隊。激化するブーマによる犯罪に対処するのが事実上の主目的である。

◀ＡＤＰ署内。室内中央部に見えるのがネネの机。

Leon McNichol (25 years old)

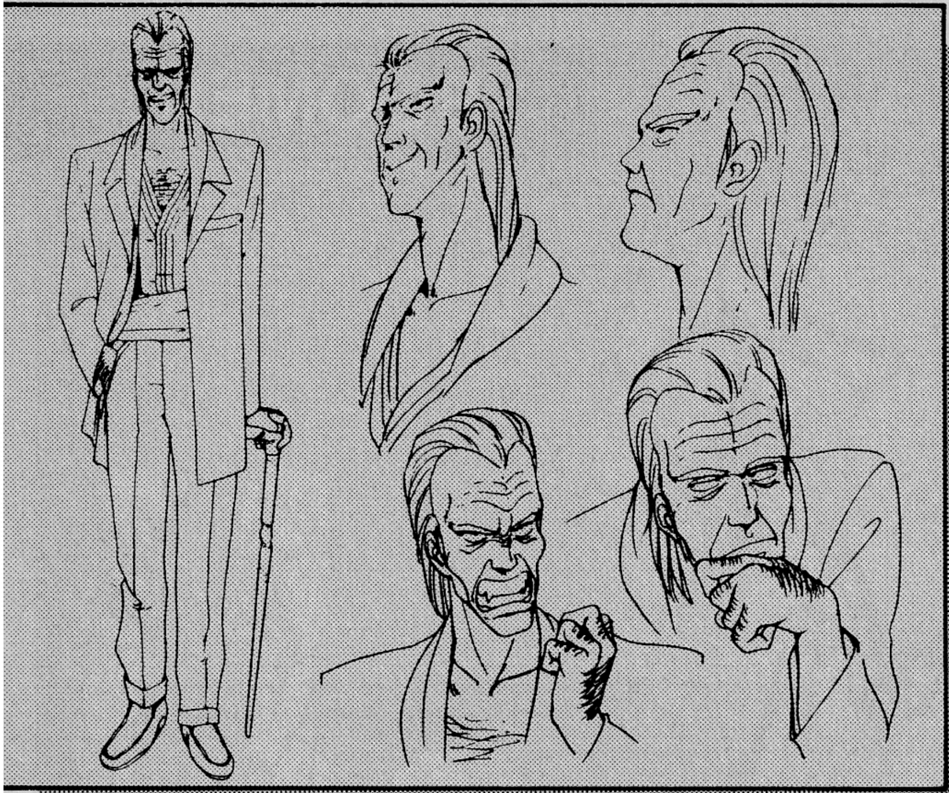
A detective with the AD Police. He is a huge fan of Priss.

AD Police (A.D. POLICE)

A riot control unit newly established to meet the demands of the era within a police organization that has been administratively divided into seven sections. Dealing with the intensifying crimes committed by Boomers is its primary de facto purpose.

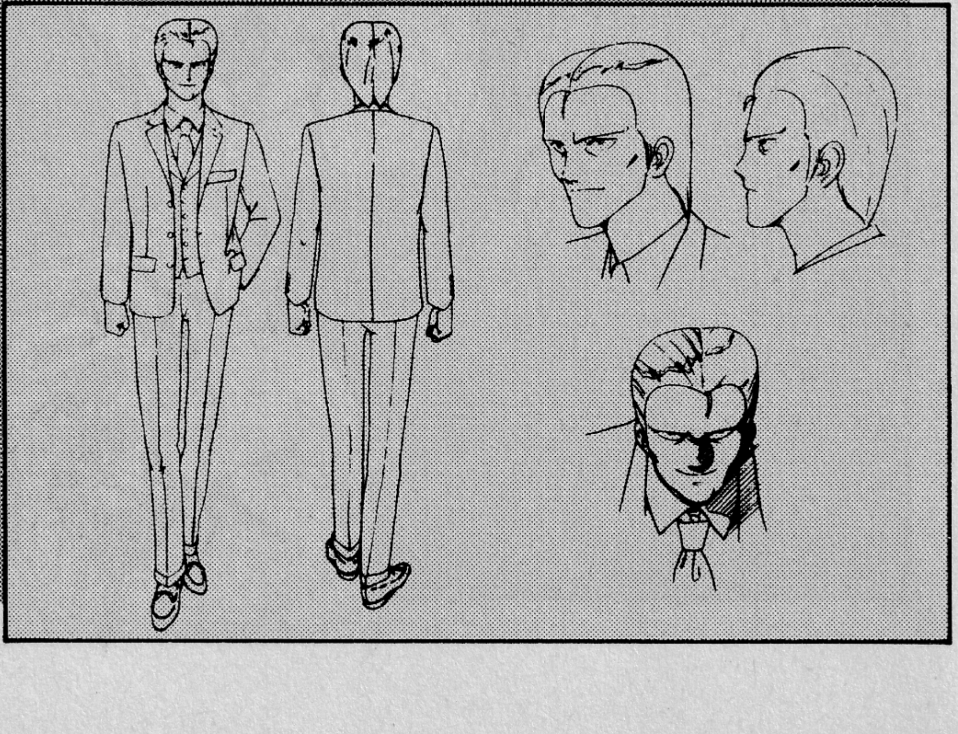
Inside the ADP Office

(Visible in the center of the room is Nene’s desk.)



◀ゲノム会長、クインシー。

震災後の東京とともに巨大化して来たゲノム社、その製品は生活用品から兵器までと多様だ。そしてその力は政界へも大きく影響している。

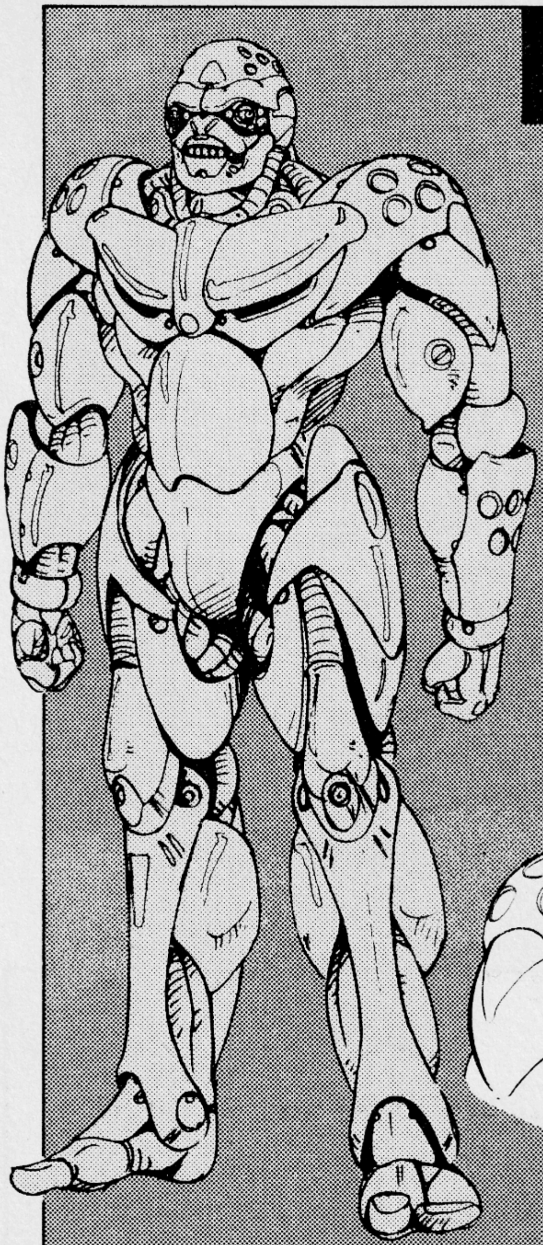


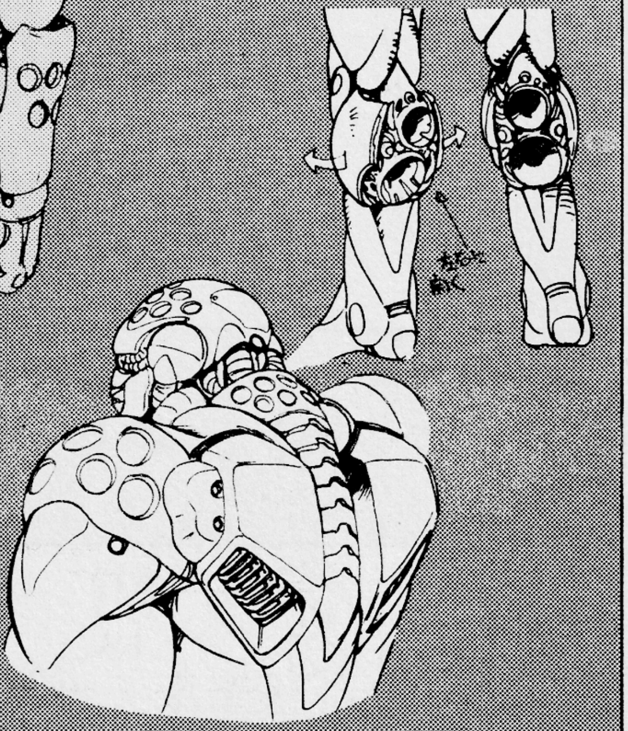
▶ゲノムの幹部メイスン。

▼ Genom Chairman, Quincy. Genom Corporation grew into a giant alongside Tokyo after the earthquake disaster. Its products are diverse, ranging from household goods to weaponry. Its influence extends significantly into the political world as well.
[Label for Mason] ▼ Genom executive, Mason.

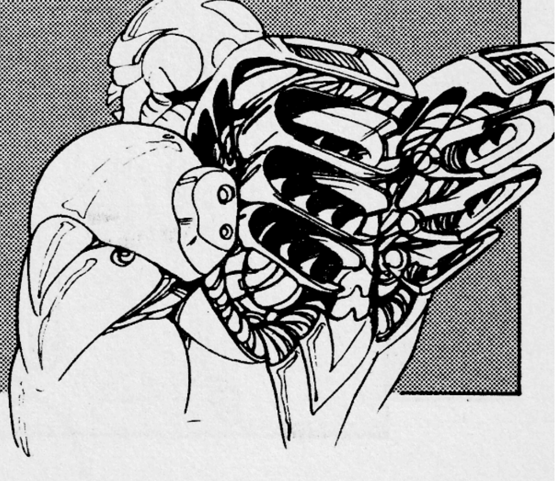
BOOMER

もともとは宇宙時代に備えて、２０２０年、シリアの父によって生み出される。後にゲノム社が戦闘用ブーマを開発し、東京に新たな犯罪を生み出す結果となる。





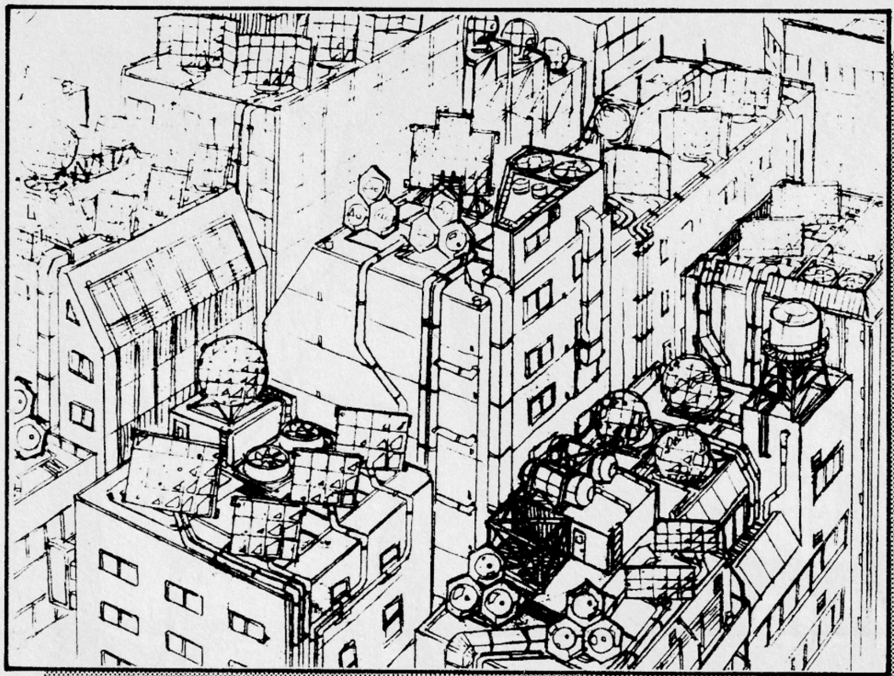
▶ブーマの背面ノズル。これと脚部のノズルによりホバー走行が可能となる。



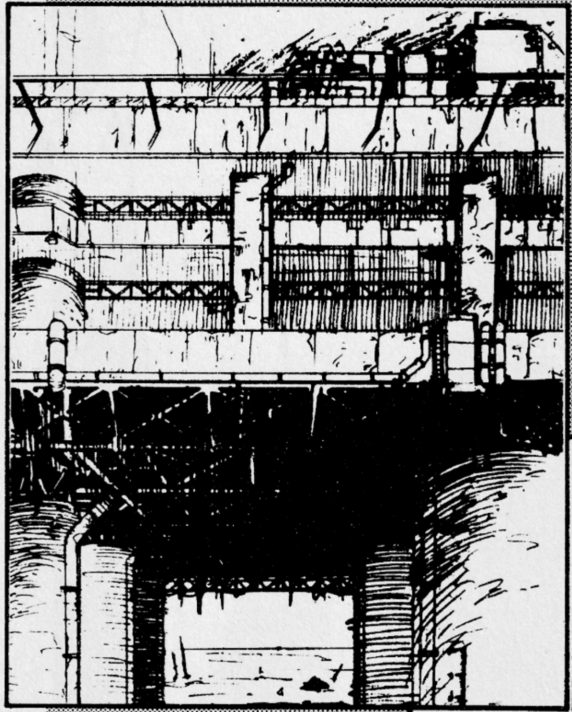
▲ **Boomer back nozzles.** These, along with the nozzles on the legs, allow for hover-movement.

BOOMER Originally created by Sylia's father in 2020 in preparation for the space age. Later, Genom Corporation developed combat Boomers, which resulted in the creation of new types of crime in Tokyo.

TOKYO

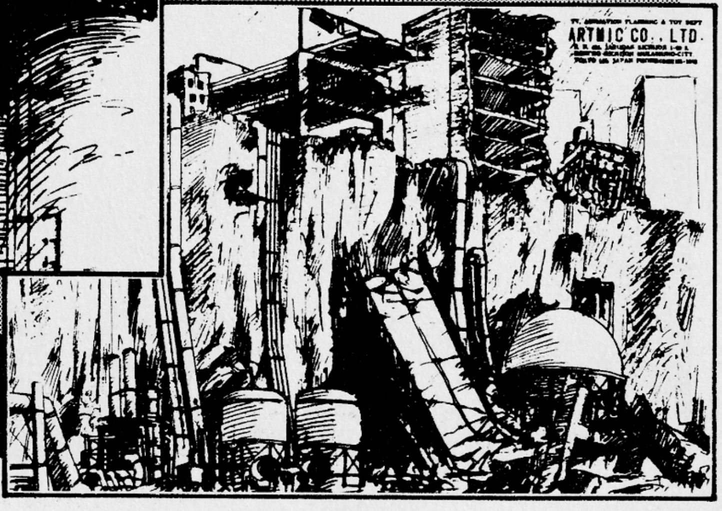


◀再建された町並。そして人々の生活の一部を支える太陽熱集光器群。

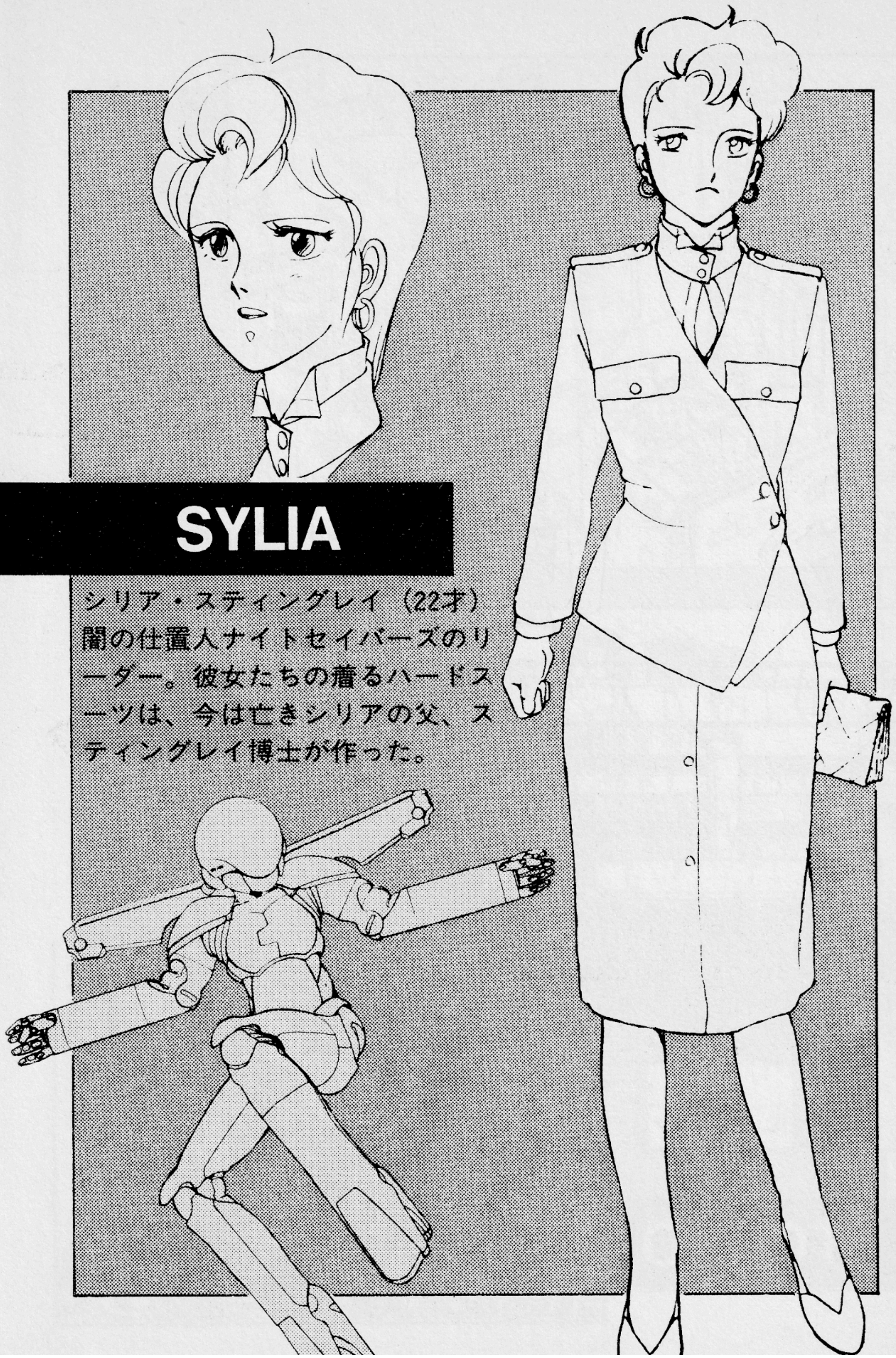


◀過密化した都市の人口を海上へと移住させるべく作られた水上都市。

▼２０２５年の関東大震災によって生じた大断層。現在は工業プラントが作られ、大小のパイプラインが地を埋めている。


ARTMIC CO., LTD.

- **...solar thermal concentrator arrays that support a portion of [the city/facility].**
- **▼ Reconstructed city streets and the lives of the people.**
- **< A floating city created to migrate the population of the overcrowded city onto the sea.**
- **▼ The Great Fault caused by the 2025 Kanto Great Earthquake. Currently, industrial plants have been built there, and the ground is buried under pipelines of all sizes.**

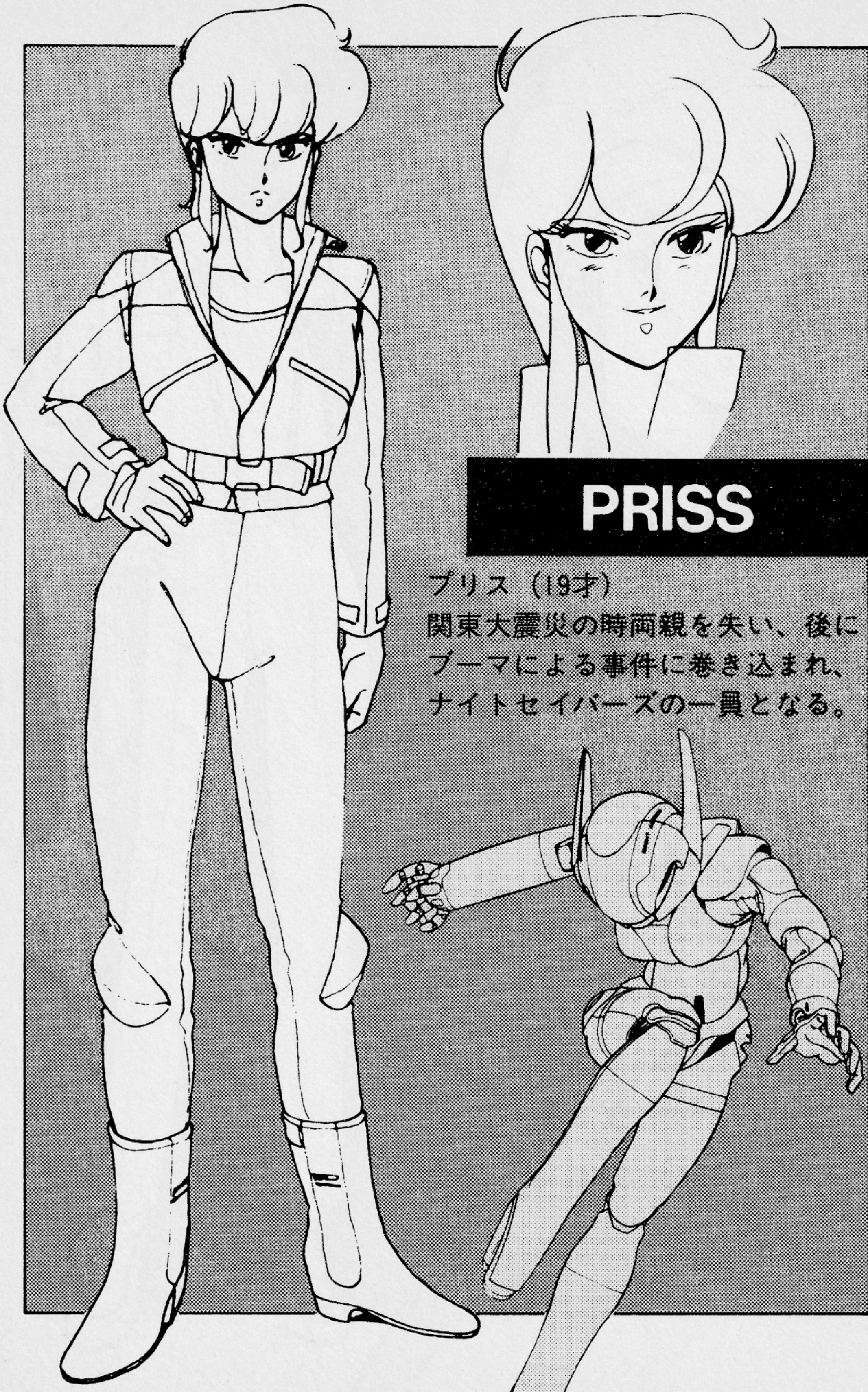


SYLIA

シリア・スティングレイ（22才）闇の仕置人ナイトセイバーズのリーダー。彼女たちの着るハードスーツは、今は亡きシリアの父、スティングレイ博士が作った。

SYLIA

Sylia Stingray (22 years old) The leader of the "Night Sabers," the avengers of the darkness. The hard suits they wear were created by Sylia's late father, Dr. Stingray.

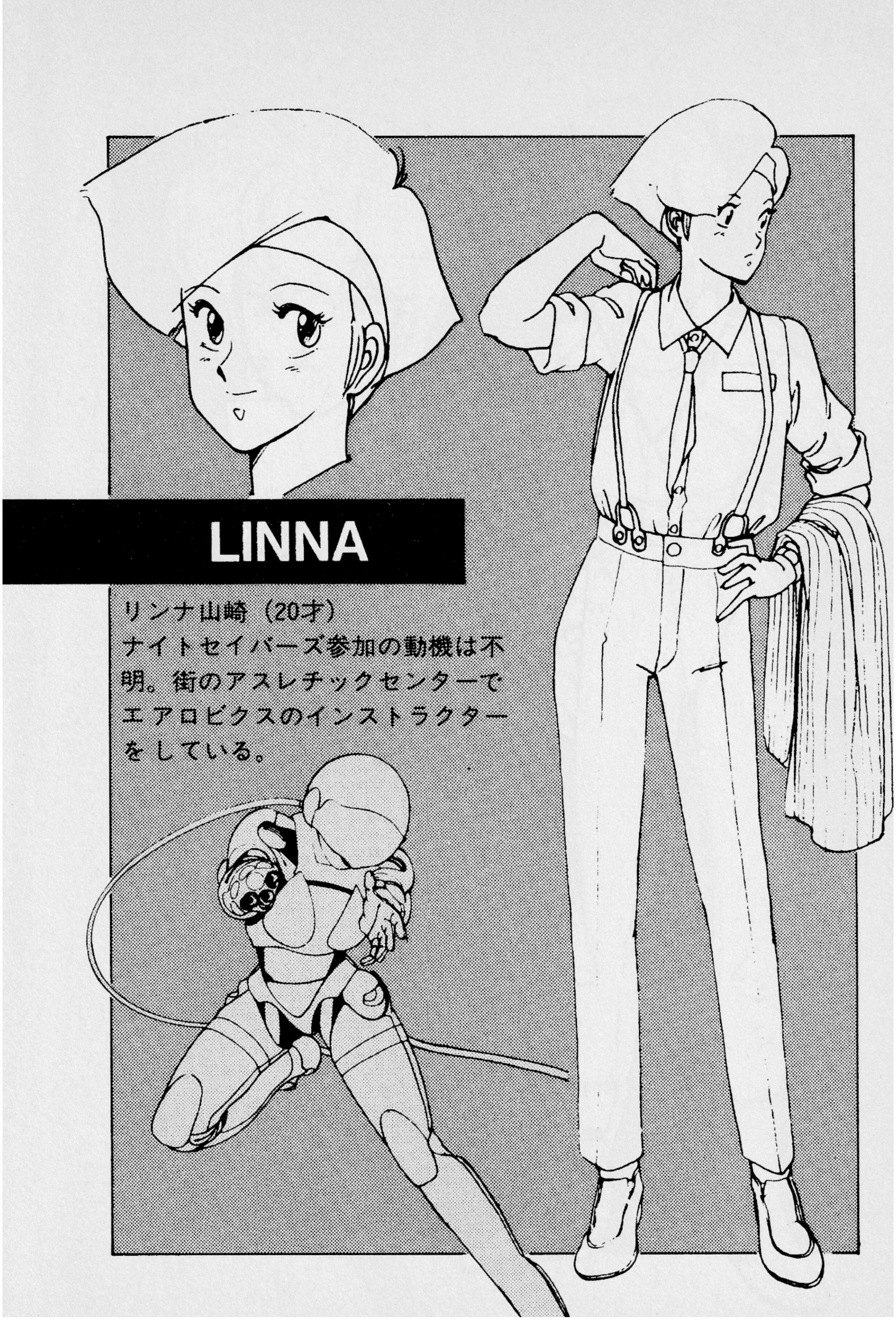


PRISS

プリス（19才）
関東大震災の時両親を失い、後に
ブーマによる事件に巻き込まれ、
ナイトセイバーズの一員となる。

PRISS

Priss (19 years old) She lost her parents during the Great Kanto Earthquake and was later caught up in an incident involving a Boomer, which led her to become a member of the Night Sabers.

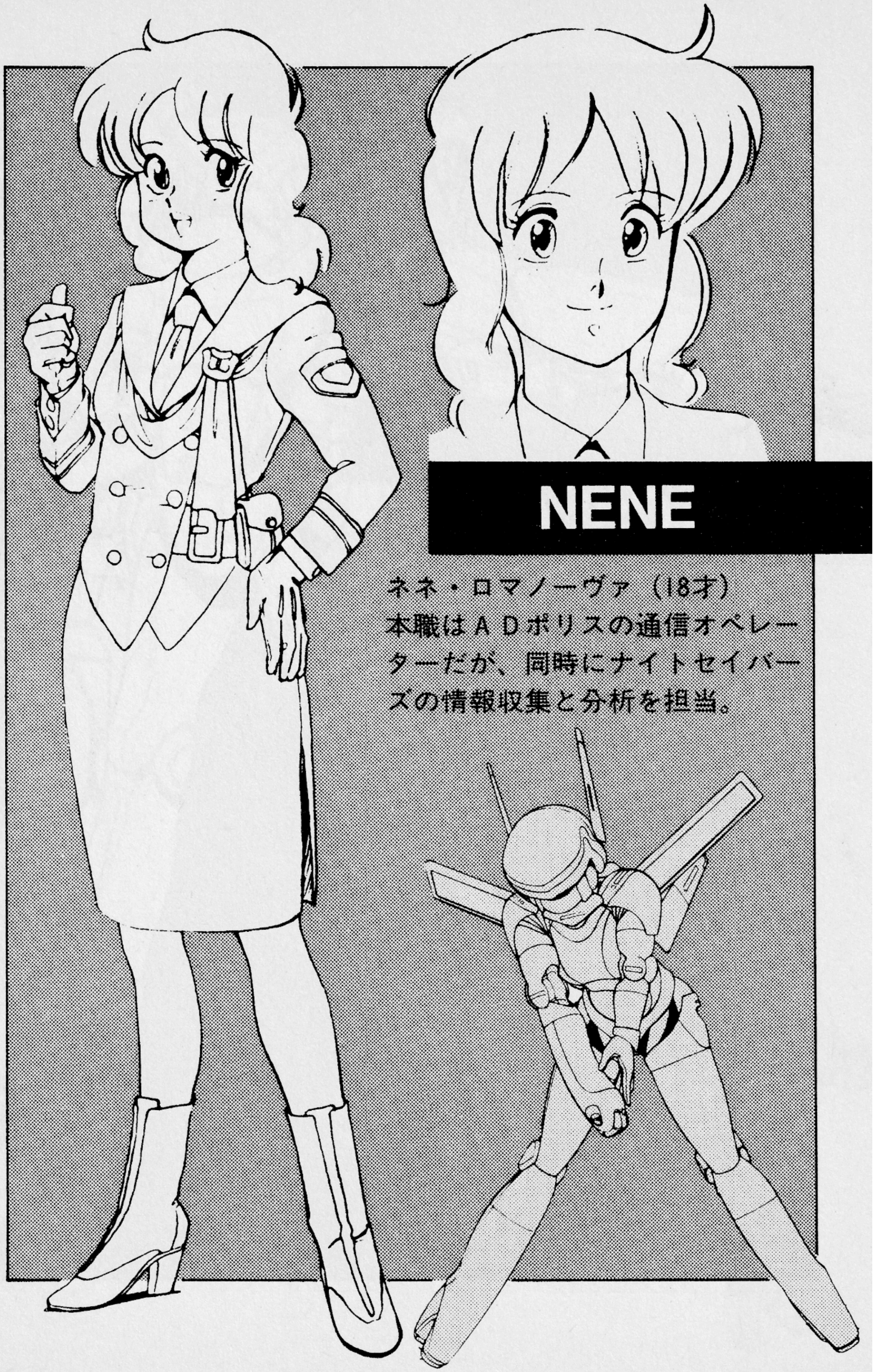


LINNA

リンナ山崎（20才）
ナイトセイバーズ参加の動機は不明。街のアスレチックセンターでエアロビクスのインストラクターをしている。

LINNA

Linna Yamazaki (20 years old) Her motive for joining the Night Sabers is unknown. She works as an aerobics instructor at an athletic center in the city.

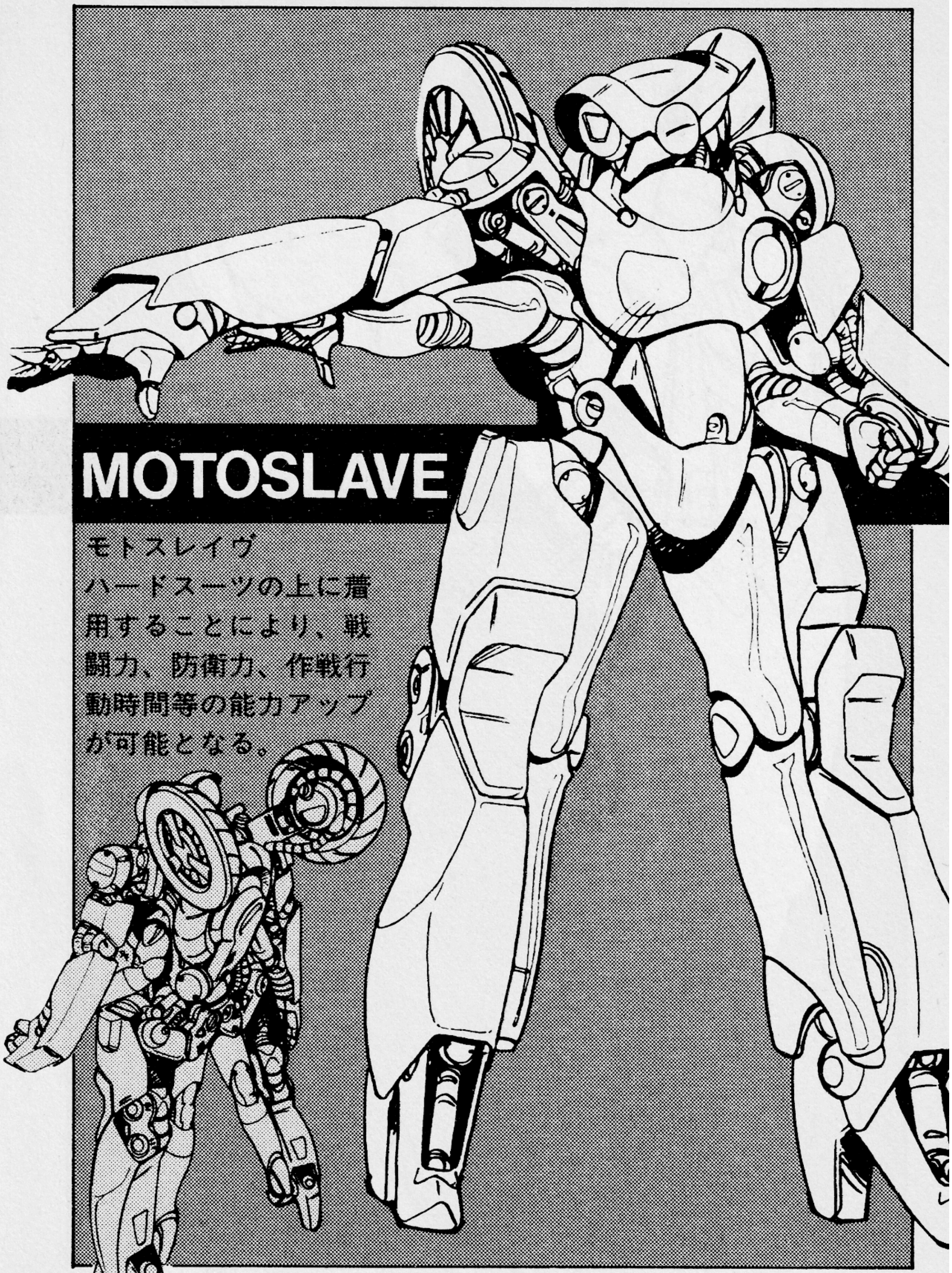


NENE

ネネ・ロマノーヴァ（18才）
本職はＡＤポリスの通信オペレーターだが、同時にナイトセイバーズの情報収集と分析を担当。

NENE

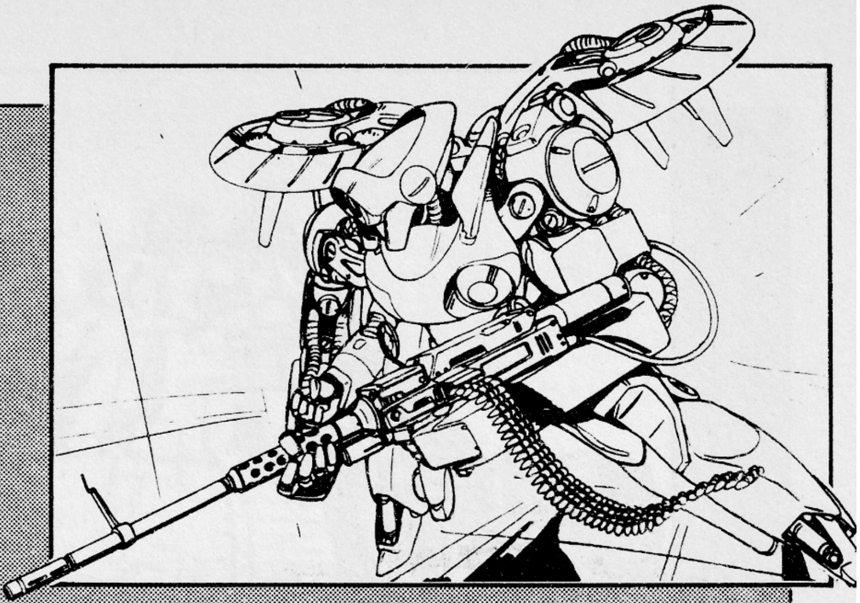
Nene Romanova (18 years old) Her day job is a communications operator for the AD Police, but she simultaneously handles information gathering and analysis for the Night Sabers.



MOTOSLAVE

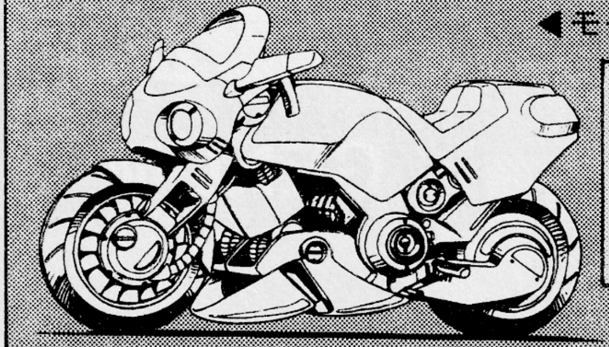
モトスレイヴ
ハードスーツの上に着用することにより、戦闘力、防衛力、作戦行動時間等の能力アップが可能となる。

MOTOSLAVE
By being worn over the hard suit, it allows for an increase in capabilities such as combat power, defensive strength, and operational mission time.



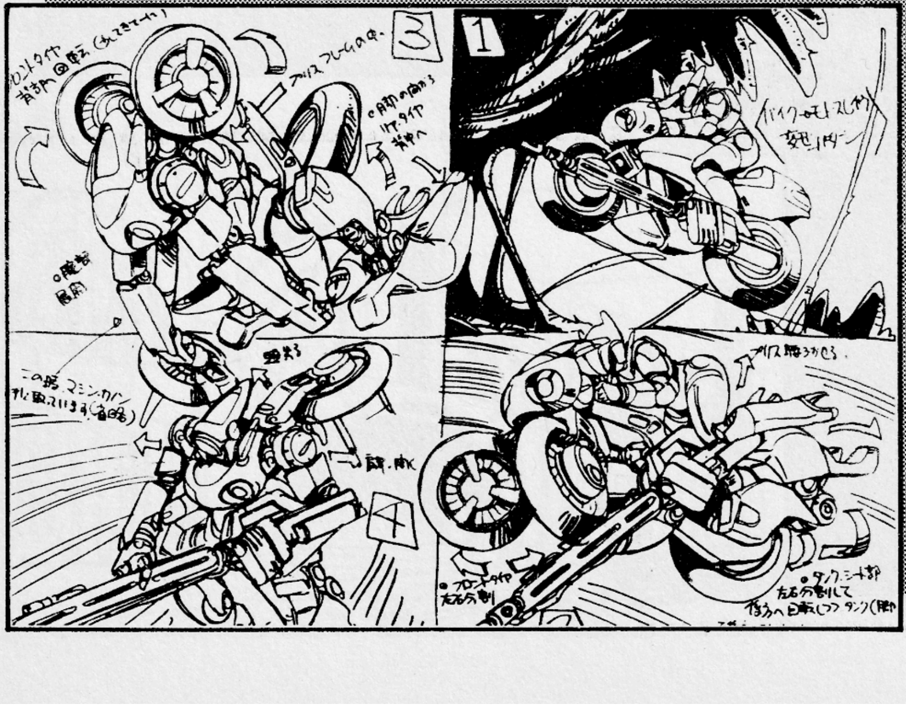
▶２基のファンローターによるホバーリング状態のモトスレイヴ

◀モーターサイクルモード



DATA
速度／170km/h
重量／167kg、279kg
全高／2.46m

◀バイクよりモトスレイヴへの変形パターン。


1
〈バイク→モトスレイヴ 変形パターン〉
ブリス腕ふりあげる。
● フロントタイヤ 左右分割
● タンク・シート部 左右分割して 後方へ回転しつつ タンク(脚
3
フロントタイヤ 背部へ回転
ブリス フレームの中。
● 肩部の向かう リア・タイヤ 背中へ
● 腕部 展開
4
この時、マシンガンを取っています(省略)
頭.胸

MOTOSLAVE Transformation & Data

< Motorcycle Mode

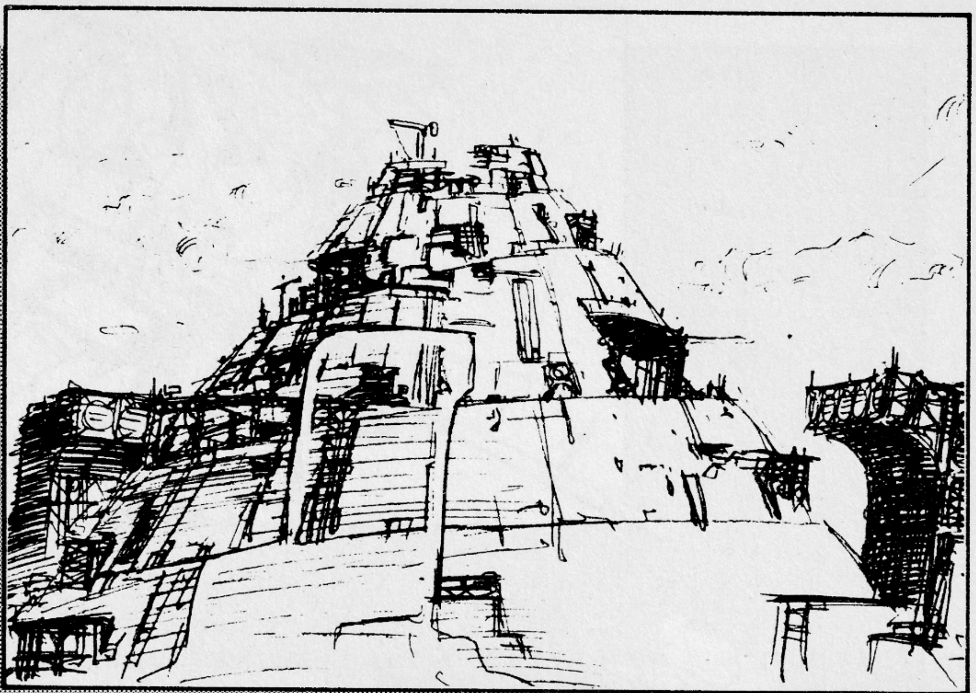
- **DATA:**
  - **Speed:** 170 km/h
  - **Weight:** 167 kg / 279 kg (Base / Full load)
  - **Total Height:** 2.46 m (In Motoslave mode)

< Transformation pattern from Bike to Motoslave:

- **Front Tire / Tank / Seat Section:** These split left and right and rotate toward the rear
- **Front Tire:** Rotates to the back.
- **The Motoslave in Hovering State:** Achieved by two fan rotors.
- **Back Rotation:** [Notes regarding the folding mechanism into the back frame].
- **Machine Cannon:** [Note indicating the weapon is accessible/held in hand at this stage].

Design Notes

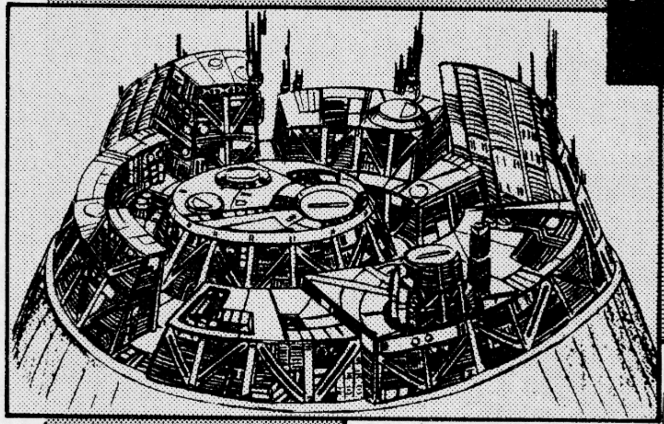
- **Priss's Frame:** Mentions how Priss fits inside the frame during the transformation.
- **Propulsion:** Highlights the fan rotors that allow the unit to hover, which is a signature feature of the Motoslave's combat mobility.



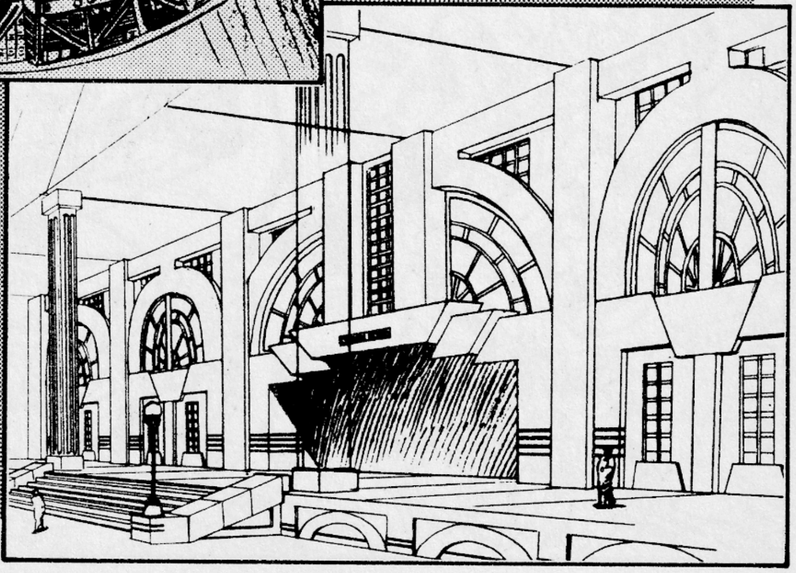
▶全高約一〇〇〇mのゲノムタワーは正に未来のバベルタワーだ。

GENOM

世界をも手中におさめんと、発展を続ける大複合企業ゲノム。



▲現在も建設が進められているゲノムタワー最上部。



▶ゲノムタワー正面入口。

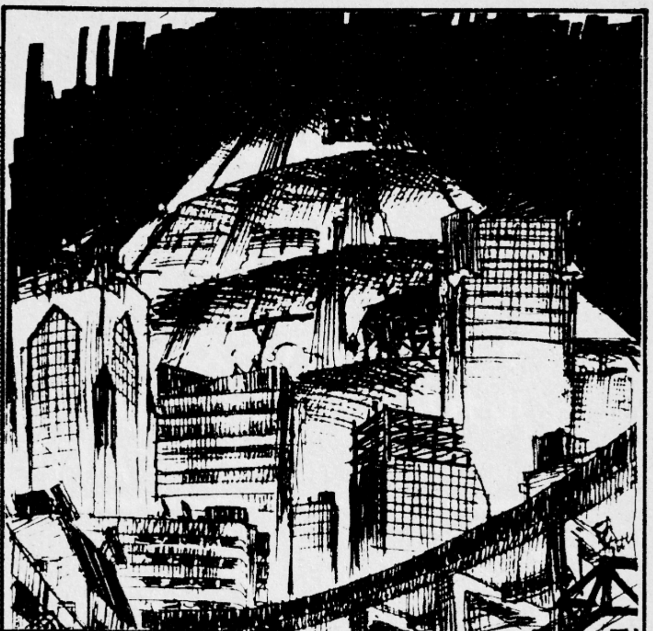
GENOM A massive conglomerate that continues to grow, aiming to hold the entire world in its grasp.

▲ The Genom Tower, standing at approximately 1,000 meters tall, is truly a Tower of Babel for the future.

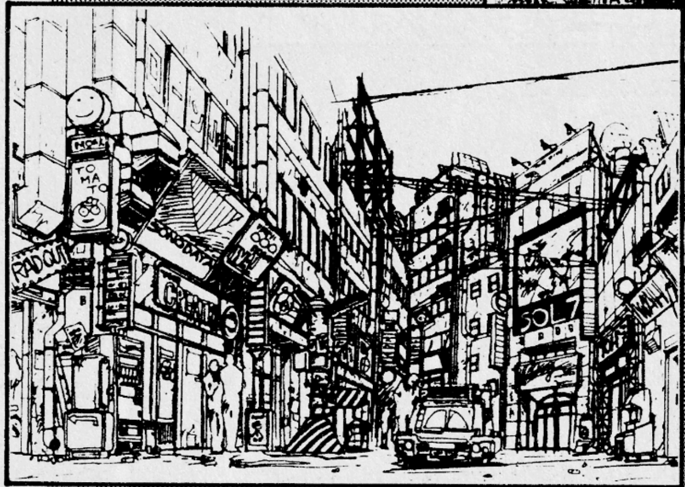
▲ The uppermost levels of the Genom Tower, which are currently still under construction.

▲ The main entrance of the Genom Tower.

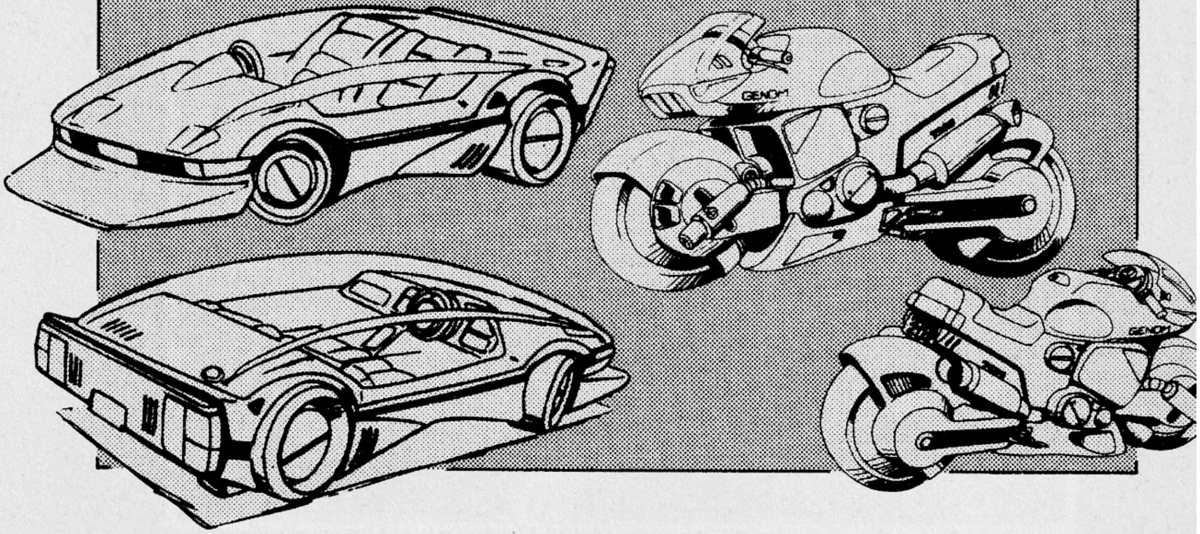
▶２０３２年ＴＯＫＹＯ。数多くのビルが建ち並び複雑にからみ合う道路、そして、それを見下ろす様にそびえ立つゲノムタワー。



▼繁華街。人ごみの中それぞれ何かを求めて町は活気に満ちあふれている。


TO
MA
TO
RADOUT
SOL7

▼新エネルギー、“ガソール”によって走るスポーツカー（左）とバイク（右）。


GENOM
GENOM

TOKYO in 2032. Countless buildings stand in rows, connected by complex, intertwining roads—and towering over it all, as if looking down on everything, stands the Genom Tower.

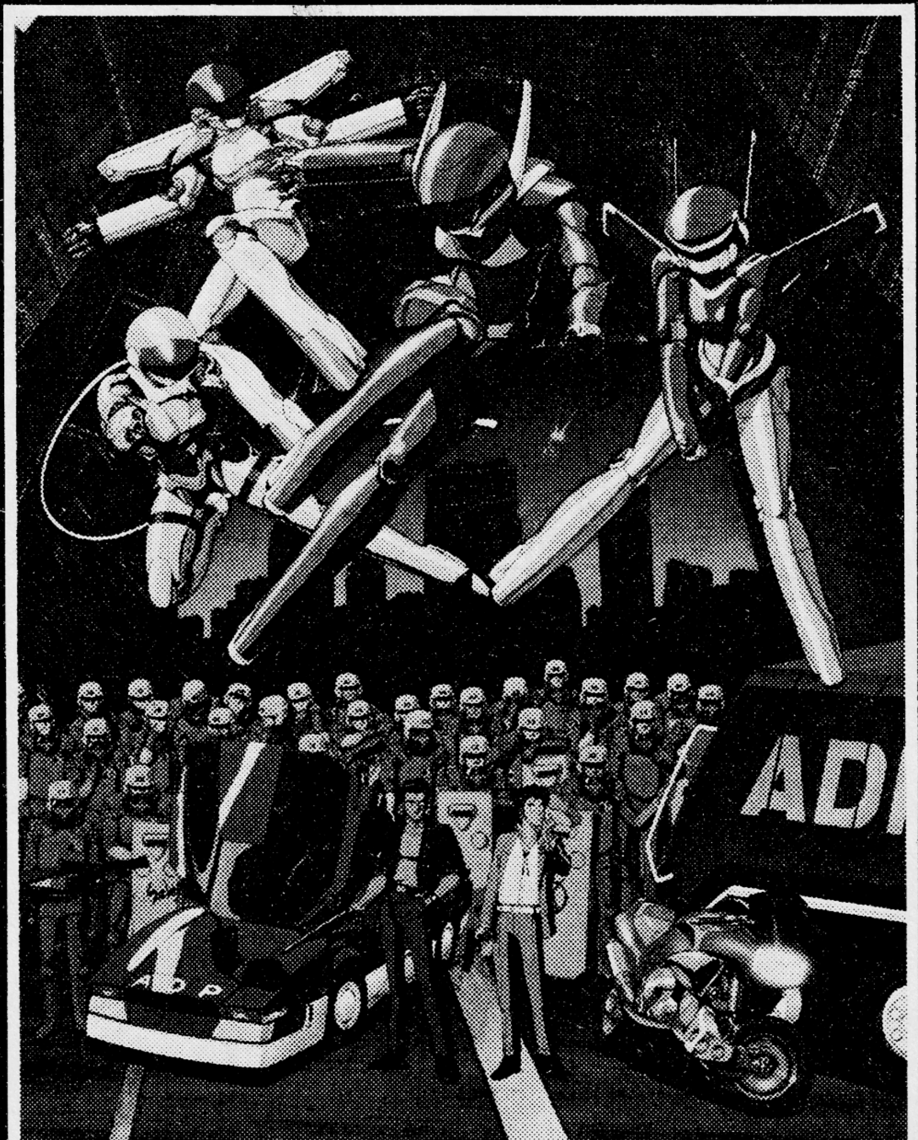
▼ **The downtown district.** The city is overflowing with energy, with people in the crowds each searching for something of their own.

▼ **Sports car (left) and motorcycle (right) powered by the new energy source, "Gasol."**

オリジナルビデオアニメーション

バブルガムクライシス設定資料集

ナイトセイバーズ、ブーマ、ADポリス他バブ
ルガムクライシスの世界の魅力を一挙に紹介！
構成／ARTMIC

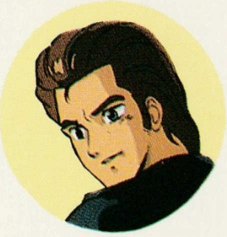


Original Video Animation: Bubblegum Crisis

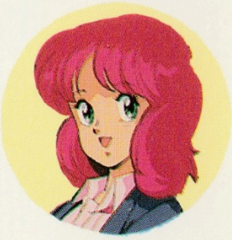
Setting Materials Collection

An all-in-one introduction to the allure of the Bubblegum Crisis world, featuring the Night Sabers, Boomers, AD Police, and more!
Composition / ARTMIC

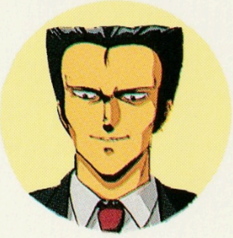
●登場人物



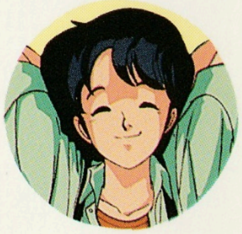
レオン



ネネ

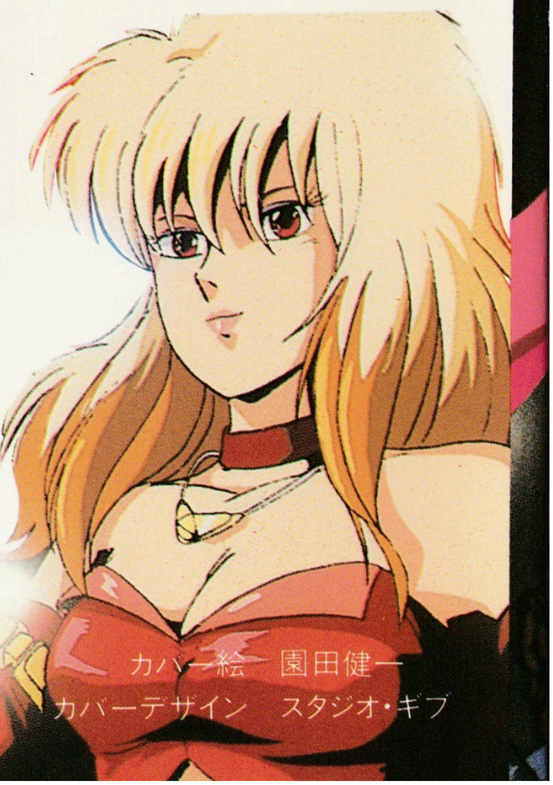


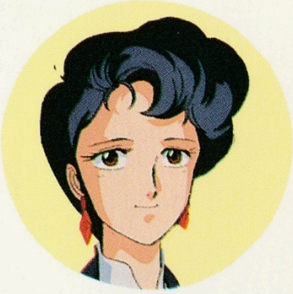
メイスン



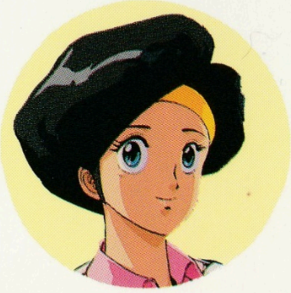
マッキー

プリス





シリア



リンナ

カバー絵　園田健一
カバーデザイン　スタジオ・ギブ

The end!